

HOPE AND A FUTURE:  
CONFRONTING THE DEATH OF CONFESSIONAL LUTHERANISM

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## PREFACE

I carry in my heart, I suppose, the angst of many who choose to write. Who wants their personal feelings and ideas in print, available for critique? In a recent exchange on the Church and Change web site, Pastor Rolfe Westendorf closed a discussion about worship with these words, “If you can’t disagree with true respect and love, be quiet.” I pray, as a pastor in the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS), that my writing lives up to that advice. I aim to be like Christ and speak the truth in love.

I write to be an encouragement to the many faithful individuals, pastors, and church leaders in the WELS who pray, struggle, and strive each day to make their local churches and, thereby, our church body, a better tool in the hands of a loving God. I hope to remind our WELS administrative leaders, who do not currently serve in full-time parish work, that parish pastors are out in the churches praying for them, learning, writing, trying to help. Our leaders take much unfounded criticism. Leaders of the WELS, take heart! The people you serve think of you often—in good ways. I hope to encourage individual WELS members, local church leaders, and parish pastors. God loves us all. Do not give up. Take heart each day in the Scriptures! Let this writing be another plank in the bridge between our parish church leaders and those who lead through the various synod boards and committees.

I write to turn up the volume on the voice of Confessional Lutheranism. The WELS is too quiet in American Christianity. Many congregations in many denominations seek renewal and revival. As we work together as a synod and experience God’s great love, let us not forget our responsibility to the entire body of Christ. It is important for Confessional Lutherans to share our blessings in Christ with our dying, sin-filled world.

However, we also need to share our blessings with our brothers and sisters in Christ—the other denominations. God has given WELS much. Let us be bold in sharing what God has taught us with all in Christendom who are searching for additional insight and help. I write to encourage my Christian friends in other church bodies. Take heart and direction in the Word! We in the WELS fight alongside of you.

Some may disagree with my ideas and observations. Some may agree. I write to honor my Heavenly Father as he directs and enables me. It is important for church members, pastors, and synod leaders to put their thoughts in writing from time to time. Such writing points to what God has done and continues to do in us and through us. Such writing helps people clarify issues and connect with like-minded brothers and sisters in Christ who can work together to make improvements. Such writing provides a historical benchmark or context for future generations to consider as they face similar or different challenges in their day.

Over the past twenty-five years or so, I have attended seminars, read books, and participated in countless discussions with a variety of pastors and people searching for ways to improve their personal relationship with Jesus—and to help others do the same. In addition, I have taken a three-year course at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary which focuses on renewal, revival, and reform. I have carefully observed and participated in numerous WELS conferences, programs, and events aimed at promoting renewal (spiritual growth). I have participated in WELS Parish Assistance. My participation in the things I have mentioned is not unique. Other WELS leaders, pastors, and church members have done the same—and more. My personal learning and experience by no means qualify me as an expert in any particular field of study. Such

participation, however, has helped me formulate, clarify, and articulate my personal ideas. I sincerely pray that readers will find helpful insight or be challenged to think hard enough to develop and clarify their own ideas.

The bibliography indicates the type and scope of material used in research. Much of the material was simply reviewed for the specific purpose of writing this paper. Of course, other (new) reading assignments were required. Also, I conducted several interviews with former and present WELS leaders. Interviews were not done in a systematic (scientific) way. Rather, they were informal conversations specifically designed to assist me in the accuracy and direction of the paper. Those interviewed may not agree with my observations or conclusions. I wish only to represent their thoughts or words as accurately as possible in the context they were shared. Not all interviews are referenced. Hundreds of pages of e-mail discussions from the Church and Change listserv were reviewed. Almost all thoughts, ideas, and main points of this thesis have been discussed in the WELS for months and even years.

Brothers and sisters in Christ who share the same doctrine but hold to different ideas about application of truth, or how to solve problems, do well to remember that we are on the same team. We have a common leader in Christ. We have a common enemy in Satan. No doubt we need one another to stay in balance as we strive to make God-pleasing applications of biblical truth in solving problems in our complex world. As politicians sometimes say, “We can disagree without being disagreeable.” If politicians can do it, cannot we as fellow workmen who share a common confession of faith in Christ also do it?



I pray God, in whatever way he chooses, uses this little volume to serve as a “talking point” in our church body. I do not wish to begin a debate about application of doctrine or problem solving in the WELS. It has already begun. It is ongoing. Synod leaders, individual parish pastors, Parish Assistance, the CHARIS Institute, Church and Change, and congregation members from around the country have been discussing and practicing broader application models for years. Let us keep discussing our issues as a church body, but may our actions of love speak even louder than our words.

It is my hope to provide hope. Yes, as with so many, we face challenges in our marriages, families, churches, and synod. Yet we are not defeated. God is with us. Let us be as courageous as Paul, Luther, and Christ himself as we carry out our assignment from the Lord of the harvest. Surely, he is with us always even to the end of the earth. In the WELS, let our bold actions to save lost souls match our theology and our faith.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Oswald Chambers observed that Christians must have the humility to acknowledge that they are not independent and cannot accomplish anything on their own. I consider this paper a portion of God's work for my life which he prepared in advance for me to do. However, I did not, nor could I, do this work alone.

I very much appreciated the help of my nephew, Clint Sievers, who assisted with research in reviewing the biographies of our Confessional Lutheran church fathers in Europe from the time of Martin Luther to C. F. W. Walther. Thank you, also, to Cindy Ramos who reviewed the text for clarity and conformity to the rules of writing. Mike Pfeifer served as official reader and advisor. Thank you to the Don Radtke Foundation for funding the majority of the project. I acknowledge my sister, Sharon Buck, and our parents who funded the remainder of the project. A special thanks to Reg Draheim who provided office space to do the work and plenty of insight and prayer to go with it. Thanks also to Reg's wife, Jan, who served as final editor.

Obviously, I appreciate my wife, Mary, our five children, and the members of Beautiful Savior congregation. Our lives are interwoven. As I give myself to a project, my family and church give theirs. May God give special blessings to those who have been generous toward this effort. Thank you, Heavenly Father, for your resources, and for moving hearts to share them. To you, Father, be all glory.

## GLOSSARY

**The CHARIS Institute.** A WELS think tank at Wisconsin Lutheran College in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. College president Gary Greenfield began the effort in 1997 with these words, “Wisconsin Lutheran College needs to be the place where the intellectual capital in the WELS gets put to work for the benefit of the Synod.”

**Church and Change.** A group of WELS men and women who seek to share practical examples of personal or corporate ministry with people throughout the WELS in order to advance the message of the gospel.

**Issues In WELS.** A group of WELS men and women who seek to identify issues of concern regarding scriptural teaching, inform others of these issues, initiate public discussion of these issues, and offer input and support to those entrusted with supervision of doctrine and practice in the synod.

**Martin Luther College.** The undergraduate training college for WELS pastors and teachers, located in New Ulm, Minnesota.

**Parish Assistance.** The WELS consulting service associated with the Parish Services division of the synod.

**Polity.** A system of management or government, referring especially in this work, to church management or governing systems in a local congregation.

***Quartalschrift.*** The earliest theological publication produced by Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary.

***Reine Lehre.*** A term in the German language often referred to by WELS pastors, meaning “pure doctrine.”

**Wauwatosa theology.** Emphasis on the idea that all forms of ministry flow from the gospel, not the law. This theology was developed by John Schaller, August Pieper, and J. P. Koehler in the early 1900s at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary (then located in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin). This theological approach is described in *The Wauwatosa Theology*, a three-volume set edited by Curtis A. Jahn.

**Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary.** The WELS seminary which has the sole intent of preparing men to serve as parish pastors in the WELS. Located in Mequon, Wisconsin.

## ABSTRACT

This thesis contends that the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) is in crisis. This thesis further contends that because God is faithful and his Word works today as in the past, revival in the WELS is possible. The solution to spiritual lethargy has not changed from biblical times, nor will it ever change. WELS leaders, pastors, and members must get into the Scriptures, repent, and pray. WELS leaders, pastors, and members must pray that God pour out the Holy Spirit on the WELS through the Word and Sacraments. WELS does not deserve a revival and cannot produce one itself; it has nowhere else to turn for help but to the living God.

Some in the WELS have wrongly narrowed the definition of faithfulness to the phrase “just preach the gospel.” This thesis contends that the WELS must expand the functional definition of faithfulness to a more biblical practice. Even Jesus, the living gospel, was wrapped in swaddling clothes and placed in a manger. Though the clothes and manger did not save one soul, the clothes and manger had a significant purpose. It is true that the gospel in Word and Sacrament cannot be made more effective in terms of working on a heart. However, that does not remove the Christian’s duty to do everything he or she possibly can to shine the gospel light out into the dark world.

## INTRODUCTION

God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble.  
Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way.  
The Lord Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.

Psalm 46:1-2a, 7 NIV

“By the sixties, Lutherans faced an identity crisis. Numerous questions seemed to demand answers. For example: Within the spectrum of American Christianity did Lutheranism have a viable future as a separate confessional church? Was there anything unique, and therefore worthy of preservation, about Lutheranism?”<sup>1</sup>

By the numbers, the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) is a straightforward church body. Following the synod’s August 2005 convention in New Ulm, Minnesota, a press release described the church body thus: “WELS, characterized as theologically conservative, is the third largest Lutheran church body in the United States. With national offices at 2929 N. Mayfair Rd., Milwaukee, Wis., WELS includes 1,259 congregations serving 400,858 baptized members in North America. WELS helps support 195 congregations in its home missions program. WELS supports 57 world missionaries and 19 teachers working in 36 different languages in 23 countries, serving with 122 national pastors among 72,929 baptized members.”<sup>2</sup>

Why the WELS? The Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod is on this earth to do God’s bidding. It has been called into existence by the Father through the Word and Spirit. God has assigned it a specific place, duty and time on the stage of human history, and Christian history in particular. Through the WELS, God continues to underscore

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<sup>1</sup> E. Clifford Nelson, ed., *The Lutherans in North America*, revised edition (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 515.

<sup>2</sup> “WELS Strives to Put House in Order.” WELS Communication Services press release dated 29 July 2005. Retrieved from WELS web site:  
<http://www.wels.net/cgi-bin/site.pl?2617&contentID=35208&collectionID=881&seq=5>.

specific truths of the Bible which were brought to light again in the Lutheran Reformation. Through the WELS, God continues to remind Christians of the value of systematic theology, which includes the gem of the Lutheran Confessions. Many Christians of today work toward showing how much “true Christians” are being brought together by the Holy Spirit. However, WELS highlights and clarifies the biblical concepts of justification and sanctification especially in contrast to Reformed, Catholic, and Pentecostal theology of today. This provides a voice of balance which helps God’s people of all denominations to think things through completely.

Through the WELS, God models the real possibility of close-knit fellowship based on the Word of God in all its points, not just a few. Through the WELS, God provides another church body where compromise on the inerrancy of the Word, evolution, the homosexual agenda, same-sex marriage, and abortion is unthinkable. Through the WELS, God provides scholarly Christianity with additional men who teach the original languages of the Bible with exceeding skill and diligence. Through the WELS, God provides a clear voice and additional testimony that God alone saves souls from a literal hell through Jesus alone—not through any work or merit in us at any point in time.

Through the WELS, God has raised up excellent Christian books; materials for the deaf, mentally disabled, and people in prison; Bible studies; and Bible commentaries which serve as beacons of light in our oftentimes tainted liberal Christian world. All materials produced in the WELS flow from the idea that the Bible is absolutely true and that Christ alone has saved us. Through the WELS, God has provided a quiet, steadfast, and dignified form of Christianity which is not easily moved or compromised in terms of the Word. In the WELS God has given himself an additional voice and place where the

final say in all things having to do with church is the Word of God—not the papacy or any human being. Through the Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Church (CELC), members of the WELS support and encourage brothers and sisters in Christ around the globe.<sup>3</sup>

The WELS is the largest church body that holds to the Lutheran Confession not only on paper, but also in practice. What is Confessional Lutheranism?

On the Fourth of July, 1851, the first English translation of the Book of Concord, 1580, began rolling off the Henkel Press in Newmarket, Virginia. It was a collaborative effort of Ambrose and Socrates Henkel and several other pastors from the region. In 1917, the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod memorialized its theological faculty in St. Louis to prepare a version of the Book of Concord in three languages (Latin, German, English) to honor the four hundredth anniversary of the Reformation (also released on the fourth of July). In 1959, Theodore E. Tappert, a professor at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia, edited a completely new translation. His team of translators included professors from Concordia Seminary in St. Louis and Maywood Seminary (now the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago).<sup>4</sup>

WELS staff ministers, teachers, and pastors diligently study the Book of Concord today. The Lutheran confessions include the following: the three Ecumenical Creeds, the Augsburg Confessions (1530), the Apology of the Augsburg Confession (September 1531), the Smalcald Articles (1537), the Small Catechism (1529), the Large Catechism (1529), the Formula of Concord (1577) and the Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope (1537). A Confessional Lutheran Christian adheres to the Scriptures, which find their proper doctrinal expression in the Book of Concord.

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<sup>3</sup> The CELC is a world-wide body of Lutheran Christians in fellowship with the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. The organization is made up of church bodies from more than twenty-five nations. The WELS is currently the largest of the church bodies represented in the CELC. Representatives of the CELC gather once every three years to review doctrinal statements and support one another.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, translated by Charles Arand, Eric Gritsch, Robert Kolb, William Russell, James Schaaf, Jane Strohl, and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), vii-viii.

In practical terms, a Confessional Lutheran Christian understands that the Bible alone establishes the norm for all faith, teaching and living in the church (Smalcald Articles, section 15).<sup>5</sup> A Confessional Lutheran Christian believes that all forms of New Testament ministry must flow from the gospel, and that God's Word focuses primarily on "what God has done for us" rather than "what we do for God." A Confessional Lutheran Christian views the Scriptures through the lenses of Law and Gospel (Apology to the Augsburg Confession, section 5),<sup>6</sup> and places emphasis on justification (Christ for us) rather than sanctification (Christ in us and through us). A Confessional Lutheran Christian rejoices in placing the spotlight on the simple historic facts which have already been accomplished by Jesus (the second article of the Apostle's Creed).

Confessional Lutherans believe that infant and adult baptism forgives sins and gives the gift of the Holy Spirit. Confessional Lutherans believe that in Holy Communion the sinner receives four things: the bread, the wine, the body of Christ, and the blood of Christ, and through those four things, receives the forgiveness of sins. Confessional Lutheran Christians maintain that God deals with us only through his external Word and Sacrament (Smalcald Articles, section 10).<sup>7</sup> A Confessional Lutheran Christian, through use of the Bible, Baptism, and Holy Communion, works hard to keep the spotlight on our wonderful God, not his wonderful Christian people.

Obviously, the WELS is not the only church or church body promoting God's truths in the Bible. But it is an additional voice which represents God's grace in the world and the body of Christ. The WELS has been doing God's bidding as a formal group of Christians for more than 150 years. God has rescued hundreds of thousands of souls

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 304.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 323.



from hell through the work of God's people in the WELS. Humanly speaking, because of the WELS, Bible-based local churches, mission fields, schools, high schools, worker training schools and various special ministries have sprung up across America and the world. For the time being the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod is on the stage of Christian history. It is not the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS).<sup>8</sup> It is not the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA).<sup>9</sup> It is the WELS—a unique church body, loved by God and used by God. The WELS is a wonderful Christian family of God, and it is the third largest Lutheran church body in the world, but there is trouble in paradise.

The author considers himself a hopeful loyal critic in the WELS. He loves, teaches and supports the Bible doctrine in the WELS, as described in the Lutheran Confessions, without reservation. The WELS is near and dear to him in many ways. The author and his entire family have received great and innumerable blessings from God through the people and ministries of the WELS.

However, the author is compelled by the Scriptures to speak the truth in love. A father who truly loves his family will be loyal to them. He will support them, accept them, and care for them unconditionally. Yet, he will not and cannot fail to properly criticize or work to correct sinful or improper attitudes, thinking, or actions which will hurt everyone in the family. A loving father will do all he can to grow and mature his family in love. Failure to speak the truth in love is not healthy or helpful. Failure to

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<sup>8</sup> The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod split in 1961 following years of discussion. There were those in the Missouri Synod who were becoming comfortable with the liberal ways of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. See *A Tale of Two Synods: Events That Led to the Split between Wisconsin and Missouri* by Mark E. Braun.

<sup>9</sup> ELCA is the largest Lutheran church body in America.

speak up does not help eliminate the problem—it buys into the problem. It is dysfunctional thinking and living.

This author is not the first, the only, or the last loyal critic to address our WELS family in love. Therefore, according to Martin Luther’s explanation of the eighth commandment, the author thanks the reader in advance “for taking his words and actions in the kindest possible way.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> David Kuske, *Luther’s Catechism: The Small Catechism of Dr. Martin Luther and an Exposition for Children and Adults Written in Contemporary English*, 3d ed. (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1998), 108.

## PART ONE

### BIG PROBLEMS IN THE WELS

## CHAPTER ONE

### CLOSE-KNIT WELS CULTURE

“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”

Jeremiah 29:11 NIV

The WELS culture is close-knit. This has shaped our way of thinking and acting. Our closeness is sometimes a blessing and sometimes a problem. Like a family, a smaller church body has its own culture including: mindsets, blind spots, worldviews, attitudes, personalities, movers and shakers, experiences, stories, and language (WELS-speak). As with all church bodies, there are borders and barriers to getting in or out. In our WELS-sized church body, there are stained glass ceilings, the old boys club, inside jokes, name-dropping, and politics. Everybody has a reputation (sometimes accurate and earned, but not always). If you need to know, just ask. Somebody knows somebody who is married to their sister. It is not only the way of the world, it is the way of the church world, including the WELS. Why?

Mr. Sin Nature is an unwelcome guest at every WELS gathering, but a guest nonetheless. He is at every call meeting, voters meeting, ladies aid meeting, and after-the-meeting meeting (usually held in the parking lot). At times he is easy to see, but at other times more subtle. Yet he is always there. True, Christ and his Word are at the center of our WELS culture, but we should not forget that there is an elephant in the room—our large and powerful sinful nature—and it can step on us.

Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary professor Richard Balge used to tell his students, “Gentlemen, no one ever sets out to invent false doctrine. It just happens.” Our

forefathers did not set out to create a close-knit German-style Christianity in America. It just happened.

Through the present day, the close-knit German-style culture of the WELS is real. Its strengths and weaknesses can be difficult to describe or comprehend. Of course, it is dangerous to generalize or oversimplify when describing cultures, but unique cultures do exist. The historian Tacitus made observations about the German culture in 98 A.D:

Who indeed would leave Asia, or Africa or Italy to seek Germany, unless, indeed, it were his native country? I myself subscribe to the opinion of those who hold that the German tribes have never been contaminated by intermarriage with other nations, but have remained peculiar and unmixed and wholly unlike the other people... They undertake no business whatever either of a public or private character save they are armed... If a tribe sinks into the lethargy of long peace and quiet many of the youths voluntarily seek other tribes that are still carrying on war, because a quiet life is irksome to the Germans... A German is required to take on the feuds and friendships of his father. It is well known that none of the German tribes live in cities. They do not permit their dwellings to be joined to each other. They live separated... It is no disgrace to spend the whole day and night in drinking. Quarreling is frequent enough as is natural among drunken men. There disputes are settled by bloodshed and wounds. If you should indulge their love of drink by furnishing them with as much as they wanted, they might be conquered more easily by their vices than arms... The green sod alone covers their graves. Their tears and lamentations are quickly laid aside; sadness and grief linger long.<sup>1</sup>

My brother-in-law, Rod, who did not grow up in the WELS, created a window for me into our WELS culture with this joke. “How many WELS pastors does it take to open a can of beer? None. It should already be opened when she brings it to him.” (Ladies, it’s a joke.) Following are quips from the Internet:

1. Lutherans believe in prayer but would practically die if asked to pray out loud in public.
2. Lutherans believe in the Bible but do not think Bible study is for them after confirmation.

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<sup>1</sup> Nels M. Bailkey, ed., *Readings in Ancient History: From Gilgamesh to Diocletian* (Lexington, Mass.: D. C. Heath and Company, 1969) 480-485.

3. Lutherans feel they learned it all in confirmation classes, until they have to teach Sunday School.
4. Lutherans usually follow the official liturgy and will feel it is their way of suffering for their sins.
5. Lutherans think that Garrison Keillor's stories are totally factual.
6. Some Lutherans still believe that an ELCA bride and a LCMS groom make for a mixed marriage. (My favorite because I have heard those exact words with my own ears more than once.)
7. You hear something really funny during the sermon and smile as loudly as you can.
8. And lastly, Lutherans believe it is okay to poke fun at themselves and not take themselves too seriously.<sup>2</sup>

Mark Jeske, a WELS pastor with formidable German pedigree, suggests tongue-in-cheek that the highest compliment a true German can give to another is, "You didn't even cry at your own mother's funeral." Jeske currently serves St. Marcus in Milwaukee, where long-term white German Lutherans are growing and serving in Christ shoulder to shoulder with black inner-city Lutherans who are obviously not German by ethnic heritage. In the black culture, Jeske notes, it would be unthinkable not to cry at a funeral. In fact, people would wonder if you really cared.

For better or for worse, this is what it means to be a German Lutheran, and that's okay. Let me remind the reader that I, the author, love Lutherans. I am a Lutheran—lock, stock, and barrel. I am a Confessional Lutheran, for better or for worse, until death parts us. My life calling is to make disciples of Christ, but I am especially pleased when God draws new Christians to become genuinely Lutheran, WELS Lutheran. I thank God often that he drew me and my family into the WELS family.

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<sup>2</sup> Author unknown.

As noted in the introduction, there are several strengths in the little WELS corner of Christianity. “When considering the chance of success of spiritual renewal and revival, it is a valuable asset—from a historical perspective—to have strong systematic theology instead of a “one man” leader who raises up a spiritual movement for a time.”<sup>3</sup> Welcome to the WELS world. If we are good at anything, it is systematic theology. As we in the WELS journey heavenward together, we prize our systematic theology, and rightly so. It is a wonderful blessing which binds us together, gives us strength, and shapes our church culture.

However, the greatest strength of a culture can be its greatest weakness. Mark Braun, head of the Lutheran Historical Society and professor of religion at Wisconsin Lutheran College (WLC) in Milwaukee, observes, “In many respects the WELS has become a prisoner of her history.”<sup>4</sup> Sadly, because of the close-knit WELS doctrine, practice, and culture, that is what has happened. The fear of false doctrine creeping into the synod has made it more difficult for Wisconsin Synod German Lutheran Christians to interact in healthy ways with people of other cultures, even Christians of other denominations. Several important historic processes have brought WELS to this point in its history. These historic issues continue to have a profound impact on the thinking and actions of the WELS of today.

### **The WELS Became Close-Knit As Confessional Lutherans**

The Reformation of the western Christian church was a demonstration of God’s love for his people. By God’s grace, classically trained theologians like Martin Luther, Phillip

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<sup>3</sup> Garth Rosell, class lecture, Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary, Charlotte, North Carolina, January 2004.

<sup>4</sup> Mark Braun, interview by author, 19 July 2004, Milwaukee.

Melanchthon, and others left behind their accumulated written love for the Savior's Word in the Lutheran Confessions, the Book of Concord of 1580.

As time passed, the Lutheran Confessions spread throughout Germany.<sup>5</sup> Martin Chemnitz and others kept the flame alive in Jena into the 1600s. The torch of the Confessions passed into Dresden where it burned into the 1820s. There a pastor named Martin Stephan would shape American Confessional Lutheranism in ways he would never know.

A troubled teenager named Carl Ferdinand Wilhelm Walther came to Stephan with a broken heart. At age eighteen, young Walther had left the University of Leipzig where "he considered all but three of the members of the theological faculty to be coarse rationalists."<sup>6</sup> In addition, "By his own estimate he spent more than eight years of his student life unconverted."<sup>7</sup> Finally, describing his eight years of education at the university, "He lamented that he had never heard a sentence of the Word of God coming from a believing heart."<sup>8</sup>

Before connecting with Stephan, Walther had diligently searched for theological certainty. He read the pietist classics. Those books which "urged contrition of the heart and total mortification of the old man before conversion,"<sup>9</sup> he liked best. Yet by his own admission, "praying, sighing, weeping, fasting, struggling, was of no avail."<sup>10</sup> He found no peace with God. Understandably, Walther maintained a lifelong aversion to Pietism, and clung to a pure Lutheran understanding of conversion. In an 1846 letter he wrote,

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<sup>5</sup> See appendix for more complete biography of Confessional Lutherans in Europe.

<sup>6</sup> Mark E. Braun, *A Tale of Two Synods: Events that Led to the Split between Wisconsin and Missouri*, Impact Series (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2003), 18.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 18-19.



“[Let us not] emphasize repentance and crushing of the heart [and] identify so many signs of a truly repentant heart, which can first dare to approach Christ. [The result is that] Christ with His grace and mercy is pushed very much to the background [and Christianity becomes] a serious burden.”<sup>11</sup> Walther himself experienced the full and free gospel in his conversations with Stephan. He writes about his experience, “I felt as though I had been translated from hell to heaven. Tears of distress and sorrow were converted into tears of heavenly joy. The Gospel [was applied] to my own soul.”<sup>12</sup>

The fullness of time had come for God to move Confessional Lutheranism across the Atlantic. “Forming an emigration society in 1836, Pastor Stephan led a five-ship flotilla from Bremen for New Orleans in November of 1838. Four of the ships, almost seven hundred passengers, and most of their supplies arrived in New Orleans in January, 1839. They settled on a ten-thousand acre parcel in Perry County, Missouri. Others journeyed farther north, settling in and around St. Louis. Among them was C. F. W. Walther.”<sup>13</sup>

It was this group of Lutheran Christians in and around St. Louis who helped the early WELS folks from Wisconsin get their act together after forming their own synod in Milwaukee in 1850. For the fledgling WELS, the journey to Confessional Lutheranism would not be that easy.

The founder of the Wisconsin Synod, Johann Muehlhaeuser, was cut from a different cloth than the well-educated Dr. Walther who had been burned by Pietism. Both were Lutheran. However, Muehlhaeuser practiced a relaxed brand of Lutheranism. Pastor Muehlhaeuser founded Grace Lutheran Church in Milwaukee in 1849 (today a thriving WELS church across the street from the old Pabst brewery). In the articles of

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 23.

incorporation of Grace church we read, “Never may or shall a preacher of the said congregation use the rite of the Old Lutheran<sup>14</sup> congregation, whether in Baptism or the Lord’s Supper.”<sup>15</sup> “At the congregation’s cornerstone laying in 1851, six English-speaking preachers of various denominations, a German evangelical preacher, and a Methodist preacher were present to give addresses and offer closing prayers.”<sup>16</sup> A dedication involving non-WELS clergy would be unthinkable today.

Other correspondence offers a window into the heart and mind of the WELS founder. Pastor Muehlhaeuser demonstrates a clear understanding of Lutheran justification, but also writes, “Just because I am not strictly Old-Lutheran, I am in a position to offer every child of God and servant of Christ the hand of fellowship over the ecclesiastical fence. [I] have quite often been together with English preachers of the various denominations in ministerial conference, and we respected and loved each other as brethren and deliberated on the general welfare of the church.”<sup>17</sup>

Yet Muehlhaeuser chided the recipient of his letter, a fellow Basel-trained missionary who had “defected” to Methodism, “As a non-theologian I am wondering how you, a theologian pledged to the confessional books, could take the step [to Methodism] without a struggle. You won’t expect me to believe that the teaching of the Methodist church, especially regarding the Sacraments, yes, even pertaining to justification and sanctification is Lutheran.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Those Confessional Lutherans who chose to leave (primarily) eastern Germany and come to America in reaction to the Prussian Union of 1817. King Friedrich Wilhelm III ordered Calvinists and Lutherans to unify or lose their congregation. “New” Lutherans were those German Lutherans who came to America but combined with Calvinists.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid..

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 21-22.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 22.

“Dr. Walther and other Missouri founders articulated a distinctive self-awareness of their church body as the lone voice of true Lutheranism in a sea of rationalism and American Protestant subjectivism.”<sup>19</sup> The Missouri Synod was founded in 1847, but three years before in 1844, the written voice of Confessional Lutheranism emerged. “*Der Lutheraner* seized upon any shift toward firmer confessionalism it detected among Lutherans in America and Germany.”<sup>20</sup>

The two synods began to rub shoulders at the local congregational level in places like Watertown, Wisconsin. Early encounters did not go well. (For many years, two large Confessional Lutheran churches were across the street from one another in Watertown—one Missouri Synod and the other Wisconsin Synod.) “Charges of ‘unionistic synod’ and ‘exclusive Lutheranism’ flew back and forth between the two synods for more than 10 years.”<sup>21</sup>

“By 1872, however, arrangements among Wisconsin, Missouri, and four other Midwestern synods were approved, and the Evangelical Lutheran Synodical Conference of North America was officially formed July 10-16 at St. John’s Church in Milwaukee.”<sup>22</sup> WELS founder Muehlhaeuser “accepted Wisconsin’s theological shift gracefully.”<sup>23</sup> It was the Synodical Conference, under the spiritual guidance of its leading American theologian, Dr. C.F.W. Walther, which clarified the content and direction of American Confessional Lutheranism.

It is in this context that the WELS grew up fighting for “pure doctrine.” She learned her lessons about attitude and tenacity from her older sibling, the Missouri Synod. The

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 32.

Missouri Synod learned their “fight for what’s right” tenacity from C.F.W. Walther. He was no theological pantywaist.

“Dr. Walther insisted that all doctrinal issues had been settled long ago. Luther’s understanding of the Word was correct, and Missouri was in complete possession of it. Quoting Luther, he wrote, “Thus we say with St. Paul, in most certain and unmistakable terms, that all doctrine not agreeing with ours is damned and diabolical.””<sup>24</sup> For the Missouri Synod to have the “pure truth” was their great heritage. To hold on to it was their great battle. Dr. Walther and Theodore Brohm viewed persecution as a fire from which was formed doctrinal correctness.<sup>25</sup>

This was made clear at the twenty-fifth anniversary celebration in the addresses of both men. In Brohm’s words, “At its founding the Missouri Synod was looked at askance, or even despised by other church bodies as it testified to the pure truth. Missourians had to battle ceaselessly with old and new enemies of our church.”<sup>26</sup> In Walther’s words, “I seem to hear all the enemies say sneeringly, ‘Yes, yes, Reine Lehre,’ ‘pure doctrine,’ ‘orthodoxy,’—that’s it, and that’s about all you glory in. Vainglory? But, my brethren, let them mock us if they will; by such mockery they reveal what manner of spirit they are.”<sup>27</sup>

Confessional German Lutherans had brought order to a theologically messy American wilderness. Perhaps, more accurately stated, God had brought theological order and placed the WELS on the stage of American Christian history. Confessional Lutherans had found one another in the new world, had struggled, and had succeeded in

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

the battle to become doctrinally close-knit. The pattern learned in the years of its synodical youth was ingrained and highly valued. The WELS had discovered what it was good at.

### **The WELS Became Close-Knit in Wisconsin**

In days gone by, the WELS was purely German and centered in Wisconsin. There were plenty of displaced Germans pouring into Milwaukee and out into the untilled forests of Wisconsin. Mark Jeske, a pastor at St. Marcus in Milwaukee, recalls a story about his grandfather, August Pieper, who was once pastor of the congregation. Pieper used to announce after the worship services, “All visiting Germans who want to become a member, form a line outside the sacristy after Church.”<sup>28</sup> Flocks of folks naturally gathered themselves in the cities. The History of the Northern Wisconsin District records story after story of churches forming in direct response to the “gathering” work of circuit riders<sup>29</sup> passing through.

The emigrants from Germany came largely as families, often from the same city or village. They were joined by kinship, religion, and language. Even before clearing land for farming, they erected small churches in which to worship. They followed waterways along Lake Michigan and Lake Winnebago, and rivers such as the Rat, Fox, and Wolf. Plank roads went out from Milwaukee to Watertown and Green Bay, then LaCrosse. The proceedings of the 1860 synodical convention held in Fond du Lac (on Lake Winnebago) showed twenty-one pastors serving seven centers of population: Milwaukee, Racine, Theresa, Manitowoc, Fond du Lac, La Crosse and Watertown.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Mark Jeske, interview by author, 22 July 2004, Green Bay, Wis.

<sup>29</sup> The term originally came from John Wesley of the Methodists. At least once a year, pastors would travel from place to place to an assigned group of churches (two or more) called a circuit or charge. Lutheran pastors adopted and adapted this model of serving multiple congregations in northern Wisconsin.

<sup>30</sup> Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, Northern Wisconsin District, Forward in Christ Celebration Committee, *Northward in Christ: A History of the Northern Wisconsin District of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod* (n.p.: 2000), 17.

Between 1846 and 1870, about thirty “Old Lutheran” congregations were formed north of Milwaukee in the Northern Wisconsin District. The majority of these first churches are still there. In many ways these churches still serve as the backbone of WELS culture today. Though they have shed the German language, many have not shed their German-ness. Today, the fourth and fifth generations of Germans still think in terms of the medieval Christendom model church of Luther’s day.<sup>31</sup> It remains etched in their minds.

“Real churches” have or had large stained glass windows, long aisles, large high pulpits, and, of course, a balcony and basement. The narthex (entryway) is tiny, the steps and door to the church are both daunting. A Christian day school was not optional, it was ideal. One pastor, mostly thought of as *Herr Pastor* (Mr. Pastor), directed the church (sometimes with an iron fist). The members were to attend Sunday worship, pay their church dues, and obey the pastor’s orders. No questions. No prayer groups. No Bible studies.

It is into these Christendom model “real churches” that first generation Confessional German Lutheran emigrants would gather. Between 1820 and 1969, nearly seven million people emigrated from Germany to America.<sup>32</sup> Many German folk came directly to Milwaukee, then headed north and west to find friends and relatives. These early WELS churches flourished. German-speaking, church-run schools emerged, at times before the church building itself.<sup>33</sup> Families had many children. Church shopping was not possible. Most often there was only one German church per town. The

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<sup>31</sup> For a full treatment of the Christendom model, see Loren B. Mead’s *The Once and Future Church*.

<sup>32</sup> Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 750.

<sup>33</sup> Emanuel, New London, Wis., is one example.

Wisconsin backwoods culture offered few or no alternatives (except farm chores) to Sunday morning church, the scheduled social event of the week. All WELS churches were growing; the picking was easy. There were unchurched German Lutherans all over the place. In many ways, it was the best of times. However, unknowingly, those good old days cast the dye for the worst of times.

According to Dr. Bruce Becker, head of Parish Services of the WELS,

Even today, the reality of how we grew in the past is catching up to us. People don't practice what they preach. We talk about outreach but it doesn't happen. I am not sure whether our people really believe Jesus is the only way to get to heaven or that hell is the only other alternative. If they did they would help their neighbor. We teach correctly about the priesthood of all believers but it is difficult to put into practice. There is a mind-set for many that just want the church to stay the same. People think that there is too much change to deal with as it is. 'My church should be my refuge from the corrupted world. Don't change my church.'<sup>34</sup>

The seeds of problems WELS struggles with today were unintentionally sown in the early life of the fledgling church body in Wisconsin in the 1830s to 1880s.

### **WELS Churches of the Past Grew Automatically**

People were related to one another. There was an expectation that every German in the town and surrounding area went to the Old Lutheran church. Not to do so would have been in culturally poor taste. Therefore, congregations grew automatically for many years. By using that term "automatic," this writer does not mean to imply that German congregations grew without great effort, personal sacrifice, and courage. Evangelism work, however, as we understand it today would have been unthinkable. Today, evangelism in North America is all about "crossing cultures." In the WELS in those days, there were no other cultures.

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<sup>34</sup> Bruce Becker, interview by author, 22 July 2004, Green Bay, Wis.

Germans were the majority. No German *prediger* (preacher) would have seriously considered traveling twenty-five miles through the wilderness to reach the Belgian settlement for Christ. There were too many German-speaking people to gather. People did not have time for personal evangelism work away from the farm. German fathers needed to work the land and care for the domestic animals. The children needed protection from wild animals. Storing food and game for winter meant life or death. World mission work in the synod did not exist. The Lutheran Women's Missionary Society (LWMS) was not even a glint in someone's eye.

Though the churches were growing rapidly, God's people were being served faithfully, and God's Word was mightily at work, a mind-set was being established: the full-time *prediger* does the church work of sharing the gospel. He is trained to do it. The faithful laypeople support his efforts. Evangelism skills needed for one hundred years later were not being honed on the WELS frontier for the laity. There was no David Brainard with a vision to reach spiritually lost Indians. There were no large cities nearby filling up with non-German-speaking people. Yes, there were the circuit riders. Their personal dedication to God and desire to spread the Word is unquestioned, and mostly unequalled, in WELS history. They were highly trained spiritual specialists who dedicated their entire life to the work of gathering Germans. For the circuit riders there was no farm work. The local preacher, if and when one was available, took care of the spiritual needs of the growing flock. Personal evangelism skills, however, were not being taught or caught, but that was not an issue. The congregations were growing.



### **WELS Churches of the Past Did Not Intentionally Promote the Priesthood of All Believers**

If the frontier minister proclaimed a stirring message on the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19), the zeal generated by the Spirit would have been applied to Uncle Otto who was probably baptized, but rarely came to church. Important? Absolutely! The effort to draw Uncle Otto closer to his Savior little resembled the evangelism efforts required in today's complex American culture. In a very real sense, the people could not practice what was being preached. The old European Christendom model church referred to by Lauren Meade, though modified, was being repeated in its essence by the WELS culture on the American frontier. The way of thinking about church life which emerged in the Wisconsin towns in the 1870s, 80s, and 90s would unintentionally impede future evangelism efforts in large metropolitan cities in the 1970s, 80s, and 90s.

German groups in the American hinterland used laymen to serve in almost every way possible. If someone died, they could not wait for the circuit rider to arrive. It was not uncommon for laymen to conduct complete worship services on the Sundays when the circuit pastor was not available. However, success was measured by gathering enough Germans together so that a full-time professional minister might be called and supported. Once he arrived, the pastor was expected to do his duty of caring for the spiritual needs of the flock.

Once the pastor arrived, the lay people would step aside—pray, pay, and obey. Once the pastor arrived, everyone else who once took care of pastoral duties did so no longer. He was *Herr Pastor*. Everyone else was not. The pastor was easy to identify. He possessed an advanced education, especially in the Lutheran Confessions and the Bible. Almost everyone else did not. Until the 1940s it was not uncommon, at least in rural

Wisconsin towns, for the local Lutheran pastor, Catholic priest, and doctor (if you were so blessed) to have the only advanced education degrees. Esteem and loyalty for the local pastor was a cultural norm. Anyone who disrespected the pastor or priest was considered particularly wicked, perhaps even hopeless. In such a setting, the laity were not encouraged to use their spiritual gifts as royal priests. That was the called professional clergyman's job.

This pattern is not difficult to spot in today's WELS churches. The "*Herr Pastor*" model is often fostered and enjoyed by both the people and the pastor.<sup>35</sup> The people do not have to get their hands and hearts messy with law and gospel ministry to hurting people. The pastor is called to do the spiritual heavy lifting. The pastor is to carefully study Walther's "Law and Gospel" and make final difficult decisions based on his spiritual experience and expertise, not the laity.

### **WELS Churches of the Past Valued Uniformity**

Yes, our forefathers experienced great changes. They left behind family in the fatherland. America was growing rapidly, and things were changing in society (cars, phones, roads, a shift away from an agrarian society). The WELS was doing its best to keep up. A synod newspaper emerged. After the First World War, several of our churches began to struggle with the change from German to English. However, for the most part, other church paradigms were becoming entrenched.

Church systems were multiplying cookie-cutter style throughout our churches, year after year after year. *The Lutheran Hymnal* of 1941 was an expression of the high value placed on uniformity. As each congregation purchased hymnals, more members in

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<sup>35</sup> Parish Assistance interviews bear this out, as does the Spiritual Growth Project. Warren Widmann, project director, "Spiritual Growth Project," report dated December 2001, 9.

the WELS would follow the same order of worship and sing the same hymns. Whenever anyone transferred membership, or visited WELS congregations around the United States, everyone would literally be on the same page. This same pattern of uniformity drove ninety percent of WELS congregations to adopt *Christian Worship*, the new hymnal released by the synod in 1993. Few, if any, denominations the size of WELS could imagine that degree of acceptance in such a short period of time. This too, even in modern times, is an expression of the high value placed on uniformity of practice. For a parish pastor or congregation not to adopt the new hymnal would bring questions, looks, and perhaps investigation.

A high expression of uniformity was the pastor and teacher training system. There was no need for specialists. All were trained the same way, by the same professors, at the same school—for years. There was one seminary and one teacher training school. There was one way, essentially, to do church. Options were limited or nonexistent. In the 1970s, radical seminarians wore a colored shirt under their black Geneva gown, instead of white. One left-handed seminary student was chided for not making the sign of the cross with his right hand. “People in the churches will be bothered if they see such things” was the thought. The WELS had worked hard at bringing order out of American Lutheran chaos. Consistency and order was highly valued. Uniformity was good. It would not be given away easily. Our unity was in *Reine Lehre* (pure doctrine). Uniformity was the hedge all around.

Ironically, hard work, history, and God’s grace had brought to the WELS church fathers that which they prayed for and prized most highly—unity in doctrine and uniformity in practice. Automatic growth had provided a context in ministry where few

innovations were needed to make progress. Well trained, hardworking pastors provided a context in ministry where laity did not need to be formally trained and equipped to serve. Finally, a steady push toward uniformity in Wisconsin and America (the great melting pot), all combined to lead WELS into a problem they certainly would not have chosen or could have seen coming—paradigm paralysis.

The futurist Joel Barker explains the phenomenon “paradigm paralysis” in his video series designed to help corporations make needed change.<sup>36</sup> We all suffer from paradigm paralysis. One of my favorite stories from the Joel Barker films involves the Swiss watch manufacturing industry.

The Swiss had 80 percent or more of the watch-making market in the early 1960s. By the late sixties, they had about 20 percent. What happened? The watch-making paradigm shifted from clockworks and springs to electric and battery powered. With the invention of the electronic watch-making industry, the Swiss were undone. All their training, experience, and factories became instantly outdated. Someone had moved the cheese.

Who invented the electronic watch? No, it was not the Japanese engineers, but the Swiss! “The Swiss leaders, when their own engineers showed them the electronic watch, could not imagine they were looking at the future of watch-making. After all, we the Swiss, have all the expertise, the people of the entire world know we have the best watches.”<sup>37</sup> To the Swiss executives, the future of watch-making looked exactly like the past. So they sold their electronic watch-making patents to an unknown company called Seiko. What led the Swiss to make such a costly error? Paradigm paralysis.

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<sup>36</sup> Joel Barker, *Joel Barker's The New Business of Paradigms*, dir. Joel Suzuki, 45 min., Greg Stiever Productions, 2001, videocassette.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

Were the Swiss dumb people? Of course not. In fact they were the best at what they did. Are the Germanic leaders of our WELS churches of today dumb people? Of course not. WELS pastors and others, however, like the Swiss watch-makers, may desperately want American ministry of the future to look like American ministry of the past. That is our paradigm paralysis—unintentionally locked in by the faithful work of our German forefathers. We all suffer from some form of paradigm paralysis. Unfortunately, if church pastors and leaders suffer from the disease, there will be problems. Next year is not 1955.

New thinking is required to stay in touch with the new world in which God has planted us to do ministry. However, innovative thinking was little valued, not seen as necessary, not supported, nor practiced in the early days of the WELS. Innovative thinking was, in fact, rare in the WELS. What would be the point of innovative thinking in terms of church? Close-knit by doctrine—a great strength—had become close-knit by culture and practice—a great weakness. The weakness became especially acute as WELS faced a rapid-fire, mega-changing American culture.

Many mainline denominations in America worked under the same assumptions and circumstances. They were in a gathering mode too. Few, if any, midwestern congregations were doing evangelism or mission work as we understand it today. The first American missionary, in modern understanding, was likely Adoniram Judson, who departed from America's east coast for Burma in 1812.<sup>38</sup> He and his companions faced criticism because such an innovative idea as world mission work was rare and unheard of in America. For most Lutheran synods and other emerging denominations in America,

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<sup>38</sup> Courtney Anderson, *To the Golden Shore: The Life of Adoniram Judson* (n.p.: Little, Brown, & Company, 1956; reprint, Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1987).

simply raising up trained clergy on the edge of a growing nation kept them fully occupied with the Lord's work. Bringing order and consistency out of a difficult life and changing society was what churches in America did for their own people. World mission work and cross-cultural ministry to Native Americans was a noble idea, but seldom accomplished.

From 1850 forward, WELS churches were learning a great deal about what it meant to be truly Confessional Lutherans in America, but were not learning much about rapid change and cultural diversity in the local church setting. Germans were gathering their own, but getting behind the culture curve. As a result, to some in modern-day America, German Lutherans were not unlike the Amish—or perhaps more accurately, Amish lite. That is, WELS members played cards, drank, smoked, and dressed like the culture, but in many other ways stayed to themselves, unchanged, preferring their own cultural ways and language just like the Amish.

God was teaching the skills of cultural interaction to Christians, including Lutheran Christians, in the larger, established cities on the eastern seaboard but not to those in rural Wisconsin towns. One hundred years later WELS folk, who did not grow up with change, would find rapid-fire mega-change more difficult to wrap their arms around than a greased pig at the county fair.

### **The WELS Shift from German to English**

The adjustment from the German language to the English language, especially in public worship services, was slow and difficult at times—but positive. In the beginning, of course, German was the mother tongue of the WELS. It was spoken in the homes and in the Lutheran church schools, with rare exception. From its inception, Missouri Synod seminary classes were conducted by C.F.W. Walther in Latin and German. At the

Wisconsin Synod seminary, classes were taught almost entirely in German through the 1930s. The “English only” model of teaching came after World War II. A retired seminary professor recalls growing up in Milwaukee in the thirties and forties. “German was the only language used in my Lutheran grade school, although English was the only language used in the public schools. I recall that about four hundred WELS congregations, roughly half of the synod, used only German in their worship services up to the Second World War. In my day seminary chapel was conducted twice a day, once in German and once in English.”<sup>39</sup> The synod’s doctrinal statements were written in German, as was the seminary quarterly. The synod’s first magazine for lay readers, the *Evangelical Lutheran Gemeinde-Blatt*, was launched in 1865.<sup>40</sup> People wanted the news—in their mother tongue.

The change from German to English in the house of God was inevitable, yet the shift was a true test for the WELS. Parish Assistance consultants of today often refer to “the German to English adjustment” as a model for culture shifts which need to be made in congregations of the twenty-first century. Following the synod-wide change from German to English, there was a new normal. The church family, along with its most treasured possession—pure doctrine—had survived great change and thrived because of it. By conducting most of its worship services in English, the WELS had joined the real world, and God’s people were better off.

There were others in the WELS who fought the culture wave toward English as long as they could. One person, confirmed in a country church just outside Hartford, Wisconsin, in 1945, recalls, “My pastor refused to conduct worship services once a

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<sup>39</sup> John Jeske, phone interview by author, 11 May 2004.

<sup>40</sup> Mark E. Braun, *A Tale of Two Synods*, 7.

month because the church council wanted him to conduct the worship service in English. Although the once-a-month English service soon overflowed with members (they asked a neighboring minister to conduct the service in English), my pastor still refused to conduct the service saying that ‘it just wasn’t right to preach the Word of God in the vulgar tongue of English. Using German showed proper respect toward God’s truth, and there was the possibility that false doctrine may creep in if German were not used exclusively in preaching and teaching.’”<sup>41</sup>

The pressure to maintain uniformity in the German language, though highly valued, could not withstand the relentless pressure to change brought on by two world wars with Germany. There was a larger, greater perceived need for American cultural uniformity—driven by the common cultural idea that the greatest nation on earth, America, spoke one language, the language of English.

This mega-change from mostly German-speaking to almost all English-speaking was positive for one main reason. The change provided WELS members with an opportunity to consider change and people’s attitudes toward change. Would German-speaking WELS Christians focus on their own needs or on the needs of future generations? Overall the news was good. Congregations, the seminary, the pastors, and the publications in WELS all abandoned German for English. By so doing, the WELS was compromising one of its ideals for a greater common good. Members would no longer be split by German or English preference. They would be close-knit in doctrine and language again—the English language. For some the change from German to English was a cultural surrender. But overall, WELS had wisely chosen to meet the American

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<sup>41</sup> Walter Reinemann, interview by author, 18 July 2004, Green Bay, Wis.



culture and embrace it on its own terms. This was a challenging, positive step for German Lutheran Christians who were raised in Wisconsin.

### **The Split with the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod**

The WELS journey to doctrinal truth, purity, and order is a well-documented, often repeated, and greatly appreciated story in our circles. Doctrinal challenges overcome include problems with the Prussian Union, the election controversy (worked through twice), church and ministry issues (ongoing), and the Protestant controversy (ongoing). Without doubt, however, the most significant doctrinal issue has been the formation and breakup of the Synodical Council. The story has literally become “A Tale of Two Synods.” In his 2003 book by that title, WELS historian Mark Braun describes the courtship, relationship, and breakup of the Missouri and Wisconsin Synods. In a history of the WELS written a decade earlier, former seminary professor Edward C. Fredrich tells the story of the formation of the Synodical Council and the breakup of the Wisconsin Synod and the Missouri Synod.

About the formation of the Synodical Council, Fredrich writes, “A number of unaligned synods found themselves standing to the right of the General Council as the 1860s drew to a close and the 1870s began. These were the Ohio, the Missouri, and the Norwegian Synods, which never joined the Council, and the Wisconsin Synod, which withdrew in 1869, and the Minnesota and Illinois Synods which did the same two years

later. It would be quite natural for them to think about a grouping of their own in an era when new groupings seemed to be the order of the day.”<sup>42</sup>

About the breakup of the Missouri and Wisconsin Synods, Fredrich writes, “The view in 1938 was not all that clear. This was just six years after the Missouri Synod accepted the “Brief Statement,” a doctrinal position paper Wisconsin approved of wholeheartedly. The points on Scripture inerrancy and biblical fellowship were just what Wisconsin wanted to hear while those points were under attack, also in Lutheran circles. Today the Missouri Synod has been revealed as a church body misguided by its “moderate”—better, liberal—wing, and still struggling to right itself after ridding itself of some of that liberal wing. In 1938 Missouri was viewed as the champion of the Synodical Conference’s Lutheran orthodoxy.”<sup>43</sup>

But by 1961 it was evident that the Wisconsin Synod and Missouri Synod were no longer on the same theological page. Things had changed. As a result of losing its champion, the Synodical Council dissolved.

The WELS has fought hard to stay faithful to the Word of God as described in the Lutheran Confessions. The primary and obvious reward is that the WELS, by God’s grace, has retained its close-knit doctrinal unity. Almost unbelievably, the WELS was not much disrupted as American theologians and church leaders accepted the idea that the Bible might not be God’s Word without error, or that Darwin might be right after all and six-day creationism needed updating. Such was the blessing of strong doctrine in all of

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<sup>42</sup> Edward C. Fredrich, *The Wisconsin Synod Lutherans: A History of the Single Synod, Federation, and Merger* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1992; reprint, 2000), 49 (page citations are to the reprint edition).

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 199.

the WELS. Others churches were infiltrated by false doctrine, but the WELS was doctrinally close-knit. It held fast and true.

The downside is that the WELS has spent much time and emotional energy in the fight. Focusing on issues related to pure doctrine is vital to the health of any church body, but so is being about the Father's business of making disciples of all nations. Time and energy for mission work was lacking as the focus was placed on doctrinal struggles. Relatively little was accomplished in cross-cultural outreach for many years.

The WELS has been shaped by the times and the company it has kept. Everybody is shaped by those near and dear to them. The Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod is no exception. In real ways it is a prisoner of the past. Although the WELS is over 150 years old, it remains relatively young and inexperienced in terms of evangelism, cross-cultural ministry, Bible study, and prayer groups. Its growth in these areas has not kept pace with other church bodies in America because of its history. Near and dear to WELS was the German culture and doctrinal truth. Near and dear to it was the Synodical Council, one synod, one seminary, uniformity of practice, one hymnal.

Unfortunately, and once again unintentionally, our past experiences have not practiced us in the art of making rapid, necessary change. We have remained, for the most part, a German-minded, small-town, midwestern, isolated church body under the shadow of our larger sister and friend, the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod—especially until the split in 1961.

By God's grace and because of the history the Heavenly Father had chosen for it, the WELS had become good at clarifying Bible doctrine—very good. In doctrinal terms it has been able to stand on its own two feet out from under the Missouri Synod and the

Synodical Council. However, the WELS had become independent just in time to deal with one of the most rapid and devastating culture shifts in American and world history. The WELS was battle-tested and successful in doctrinal warfare; she was not well equipped to fight culture wars. In fact, the mother of all culture wars would soon strike. By 1961 the split with Missouri was over, but the Vietnam War had begun, technology through the space race was in full bloom, and the Beatles would soon cross the ocean. The shift to a postmodern, post-Christian America was on its way and would make the shifts from “loose Lutherans” to Confessional Lutherans, or from German-speaking churches to English-speaking churches, seem simple.

## CHAPTER TWO

### CHANGED AMERICAN CULTURE

And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us. You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly.

Romans 5:5-6 NIV

Since its independence in 1961, the WELS, along with all other conservative Christian church bodies, has been trying to keep up with or figure out what to do about the rapidly changing American culture. Some have become apathetic. What's the use? Some are pessimistic. Churches are supposed to shrink in a non-Christian America. Why fight it? Still others have become frozen in their tracks, unsure of what to do. Many have become scarred, exhausted, and battle-worn. They are working harder but seeing next to nothing happen for Christ. Some fear that American Christianity will soon resemble the fallen Christian empire of Great Britain. Some say it already does.

By 2000, 41 percent of British babies were born to unmarried parents. The descriptions of "husband" and "wife" were disappearing from official forms, replaced by "partner." One marriage in a hundred foundered before 1939; by 1989, half of British marriages were ending in divorce. For the first time in twelve hundred years, Britain has ceased to be a Christian majority country. By 2000, only one in ten of the population had attended any service other than a funeral or a wedding. The archbishop of Westminster, Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor, said in 2001 that Christianity in Britain "has almost been vanquished."<sup>1</sup>

The notion that the culture in the United States has changed dramatically since 1960 is obvious. The argument that this is, in fact, the case needs to be reviewed at this point, not made. Many who read these words have lived through the shift. Pastors who have led congregations for more than thirty years have surely observed it and felt it in their bones. There are any number of books, seminars, and observations from various church

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<sup>1</sup> Brian Moynahan, *The Faith: A History of Christianity* (New York: Doubleday, 2002), 712-13.

consultants, as well as those outside the church, which seek to describe, analyze, or explain the mega-changes in American culture.

Lyle Schaller, a leading church consultant and author of several books on the subject of culture shift and its impact on Christian churches, observes, “Today an argument can be made that denominational labels mean little and the most significant distinction is between those congregations that function as voluntary associations and those that call for a high level of Christian commitment.”<sup>2</sup>

David Limbaugh describes the shift from the vantage point of the legal profession. As a lawyer, he details legal battles liberals are waging against Christianity. “Churches used to be seen as an automatic enhancement to local neighborhoods, and cities routinely granted them special exemptions from their zoning rules, but in today’s climate of growing hostility toward religion, houses of worship are seen as less desirable. A Michigan community refused to allow a church to meet at a shopping center despite granting access to non-religious groups. A county in Washington State has tried to enact laws regulating—mostly limiting—the size of churches and private schools.”<sup>3</sup>

Leith Anderson, a Minneapolis-area pastor and church consultant, relates a mega-shift in the area of education which touches the churches. “The old paradigm of education centered on time and space. The time was age 5 through age 18. The place was the classroom. The old paradigm served well when most information was old and when knowledge was crowned king. But the 21<sup>st</sup> century is an era of information explosion. Some estimate that human knowledge doubles every five to eight years. That

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<sup>2</sup> Lyle E. Schaller, *21 Bridges to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: The Future of Pastoral Ministry*, Ministry for the Third Millennium (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1994), 21.

<sup>3</sup> David Limbaugh, *Persecution: How Liberals Are Waging War Against Christianity* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 2003), 205.

means half of the knowledge in the world was not even available when today's twenty-three-year-old finished high school."<sup>4</sup>

Reggie McNeal refers to mega-shifts within the Christian churches themselves as they attempt to keep up with the culture shift. This church consultant observes, "There has been a sense over the past decade that church growth has a successor, but what is it? I would argue that the church growth movement is a transition in the North American church between the old church culture and the emerging church culture. It introduced a concern for growth and a missiology approach to church. Unfortunately, it fell victim to an idolatry as old as the Tower of Babel, the belief that we are the architects of the work of God. As a result we have the best churches men can build, but are still waiting for the church that only God can get credit for."<sup>5</sup>

At its summer convention in 2005, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America drew attention to yet another shift in American churches which has been going on for many years. This church body voted to allow its clergy the option of performing same-sex marriages and narrowly voted down a proposal to ordain openly gay clergy.<sup>6</sup> One of the earliest and most familiar books of the genre states, "It is assumed that since all faith and morality are firmly in the area of opinion and that all opinions are equally valid, the only thing that really matters is whether or not they work. Never mind if the suggested formula is derived from Hinduism, Buddhism, the occult, or Christianity."<sup>7</sup> One does not

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<sup>4</sup> Leith Anderson, *A Church for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1992), 41.

<sup>5</sup> Reggie McNeal, *The Present Future: Six Tough Questions for the Church*, The Jossey-Bass Leadership Network Series (San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 2003), 23.

<sup>6</sup> ELCA Assembly Acts on Key Sexuality Proposals," ELCA News Service press release dated 12 August 2005, retrieved from ELCA web site: [http://www.elca.org/ScriptLib/CO/ELCA\\_News/encArticleList.asp?article=3163](http://www.elca.org/ScriptLib/CO/ELCA_News/encArticleList.asp?article=3163).

<sup>7</sup> Martin Robinson, *A World Apart* (Turnbridge Wells, England: Monarch, 1992), 99, quoted in Lee Strobel, *Inside the Mind of Unchurched Harry & Mary: How to Reach Friends and Family Who Avoid God and the Church*, with a foreword by Bill Hybels (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1993), 57.

need a college course to figure out how such a worldview can erode any church culture, including the WELS.

Neil Postman focuses not at all on the culture shifts of the church, but on the dumbing down of the American communication process as we have moved from written communication through magazines, newspapers, and position papers that can be debated to a visual world of television screen communication. In our television world, how one looks adds more weight to the impact and perceived truth of his/her words than any logical argument tied to the words themselves. Recall the impact of television on the 1960 Kennedy-Nixon presidential debates. “Our politics, religion, news, athletics, education and commerce have been transformed into congenial adjuncts of show business, largely without protest or even much popular notice. There is no shortage of critics who have observed and recorded the dissolution of public discourse in America and its conversion into the arts of show business.”<sup>8</sup> Once again, it is not difficult to note the impact television has had on preaching and teaching from the pulpit. How far a leap is it from couch potato to pew potato?

Others outside the church world have observed the Christian church being trampled underfoot. Rick Reiley comes down on the side of the church as we see an exponential number of children's athletic events running unashamedly through Sunday morning. “Priests and pastors have noticed that God is competing more and more with Sunday sports—and losing. Don’t bet on coaches doing the right thing. If they could they’d have your kids running stairs on Christmas morning.”<sup>9</sup> Parents, does anyone have to explain the pressure children’s sports puts on your energy, desire, or availability to attend a

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<sup>8</sup> Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), 3-4.

<sup>9</sup> Rick Reilly, “Let Us Pray (Play),” *Sports Illustrated*, 26 April 2004, 172.



weekend worship service? This is a big problem in the American culture that scores a direct hit on WELS culture. Is it more likely for WELS parents to say no to God than to the coach? Sadly, in many cases it is. The WELS loves her sports! In many WELS churches and schools it is easier to gather people together for a Monday night basketball game than for a Monday evening worship service for Almighty God. One pastor quipped, “Basketball is the third sacrament in the WELS.” Nobody was laughing.

No doubt the cheese has moved. Church life and American life in so many ways—almost every way—have changed. What, if anything, can Christians do to stay distinctively Christian, yet interact meaningfully with the people in the culture who do not know Jesus? Along with other conservative Bible-based Christian church bodies in America, the WELS is trying to adjust to the new world order. The task is difficult.

As Mark Braun looks back to the founding of the WELS in 1850, he observes, “We were the right church for the right time. Today, some might consider us the wrong church for the right time—especially if we stay prisoners of our past.”<sup>10</sup> Yesterday, our German-ness helped us gather and serve Germans. Today, while our diverse, rapidly changing American culture is open as never before to spiritual help, we may be too German (i.e., bound by past rites and traditions) to reach out and help them.

WELS church leaders have noted for years a growing disconnect between the American culture and the German-based WELS culture. Specific examples of the disconnect between WELS culture and the changed American secular culture are not difficult to come by.

One active WELS member, a non-German convert to Lutheranism and a professional dancer in California in the 1970s and 80s, contrasted the WELS culture with the culture

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<sup>10</sup> Mark Braun, interview by author, 19 July 2004, Milwaukee.

most familiar to her. “More than 90 percent of the professional male dancers were gay back in the seventies. Many were married for the show of it or for the sake of their children. By the late eighties, no one cared whether they were gay or not. Everyone was out of the closet. All pretense was gone.”<sup>11</sup> The WELS culture has not connected to that culture much. It is definitely not the WELS world.

I was speaking with a congregation member about the value of regular worship attendance. As I spoke, he was listening carefully and nodding his head. What I was saying to him, however, made no sense. He finally said, “But Pastor, I do come to church regularly.” I followed up, “I’m sorry, but no, you don’t.” He responded with a straight face, “Yes, I do. My whole family has been coming to church regularly for years—we attend regularly every Christmas and Easter, just like my parents did.” There was no sheepish look, no shame. Nothing.

It did not occur to this church member that Christians might want to attend church more often than Christmas and Easter. The worldview or mindset of frequent worship attendance was completely foreign. Christmas and Easter attendance worked for him. It did not cross his mind that it might not work for the God of the Bible. He had been swallowed whole by the post-Christian American culture. If this is the thinking of church members and upstanding American citizens, imagine the thought processes of non-church members who have never been connected to the Word of God in any serious way.

Efforts at making adjustments to rapidly changing cultural influences are ongoing. In a June 2004 e-mailed invitation to the seventy-fifth anniversary of the current WELS seminary site and facility, Professor Richard Gurgel writes,

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<sup>11</sup> Rose Amendt, interview by author, 23 July 2004, Green Bay, Wis.

75 years ago almost all the surnames of students testified to the fact that they were of German heritage. Today, while many Schmidts and Schulzes still attend our campus—and we thank God for them!—there are beginning to be more and more students whose ethnic heritage is not Germanic and whose parents or grandparents' native language had no umlauts—and we thank God for them too. While the language of instruction in the classroom has shifted from German to English, the message remains the same. While many professors now teach with Power Point and students take notes on lap tops; while students study the ever changing prevailing culture of our country and consider sharing the gospel with those whose cultures are vastly different from their own, they still understand there is only one name that brings salvation.

This author observed an excellent WELS preacher who put hymn verses in his sermon to mirror the effect of commercial breaks. Otherwise, he felt he could not hold the attention of the people in the pew.

Today, in a growing number of churches, there are screens. Former seminary professor Joel Gerlach used to tell students back in the 1970s that television would shape—literally shape—WELS churches of the future.<sup>12</sup> The media screen culture, with its computers, cell phones, video games, camcorders, Palm Pilots, and television, has “ruined” many WELS members and their children. Children are highly motivated to spend hour after hour in front of electronic screens. However, children may be hard pressed to find time for slower-paced, screenless activities such as praying or absorbing the content of a twenty-minute sermon that essentially employs the same communication technique week after week and year after year. The list of culture mega-shifts continues.

A first marriage begun in the 1980s has a 55 percent chance of ending in divorce. More than one hundred full-length pornographic films are produced each year, earning more than \$13 billion (fifty times the entire WELS annual budget). Forty percent of women aged seventeen through nineteen who attend church admit to having had sexual intercourse. Forty-five percent of those in their mid-twenties have contracted a sexually

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<sup>12</sup> Mark Braun, interview by author, 19 July 2004, Milwaukee.

transmitted disease. By the time a child reaches kindergarten he will have spent more time with the television than he will with his father for the rest of his life.<sup>13</sup> The United States of America does not resemble the country in which the WELS was born.

Consider a list of things in our American culture today which were unthinkable in 1955: pornography on the Internet, the gay rights agenda, legalized large-scale gambling (gaming), de facto prostitution in San Francisco, promotion of public Muslim prayers in Detroit, elimination of all that is Christian in the public school system, legalized abortion, two hundred channels of digital TV, assisted suicide, stem-cell research, and cloning. Such things draw the attention of God's people in the WELS. Such things help fix a great gulf between Christian culture and secular culture. The stained glass barrier is real.

Fighting off these and countless other potential sins is emotionally draining, confusing, and frightening—even to people who possess a strong and growing faith. Christians pray fervently for their teenage children. God's people everywhere try to make it through the cultural land mines planted by Satan and his minions. Many of our WELS families do not make it through the minefield. Mortally wounded, they never make it back home, either to their church home or heavenly home.

One young man, whose father was a WELS pastor, attended a WELS elementary Lutheran school and a WELS prep school. Following successful years in high school (both in academics and athletics), he attended a secular university in the conservative upper Midwest. He was swallowed up by a cult and committed suicide in less than two years. WELS members are being affected by our American culture—person by person

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<sup>13</sup> John C. Johnson, "The Search for True North: Children on a Storm-Tossed Sea," presentation given at Beautiful Savior Lutheran Church, Green Bay, Wis., 9-10 August 2004. Statistics compiled by Dan Nommensen of WLCFS.

and family by family. The culture iceberg Christians have struck is cold but alluring—it sucks us in.

Unfortunately, there is more. Combine those problems with cultural ignorance of the Bible for both church “insiders” and those outside the church. When surveyed, 40 percent of American adults indicated that when he lived on earth, Jesus Christ committed sins; 44 percent felt that all people will experience the same outcome after death, regardless of their spiritual beliefs; and 15 percent said that God created you, but He is no longer involved in your life experiences.<sup>14</sup> According to Cal Thomas, there has been a seismic shift in the moral tectonic plates. We have moved from “in God we trust” to “in Dow Jones we trust.” The American culture no longer supports basic Christian concepts and ideals such as the idea that going to church is a noble activity.

Here is one example which has stuck with the author over the years. Though the family was not Christian, they were friends of ours and were in and out of our house often, especially the mom and kids. We had introduced their family to some of our friends, including our best friend, Jesus. In the course of a normal conversation the mom asked, “Would you, Mary, and the kids like to come to a hotel with us Saturday and Sunday and hang out at the pool?” It had completely slipped her mind that I was a pastor and would be tied up on Sunday morning, and that this coming Sunday was Easter Sunday. Non-Christians are from Mars; Christians are from Venus.

Joseph Aldrich noted one response to culture that he calls the “split adaptation” model.<sup>15</sup> That is, many church-going Christians try to lead a double life by indulging the

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<sup>14</sup> “Early-Teen Spirituality,” *The Barna Report* (May/June 1997): 4.

<sup>15</sup> Joseph Aldrich, former President of Multnomah College in Portland, Oregon, is an author of books about Friendship Evangelism, including *Life-Style Evangelism: Crossing Traditional Boundaries to Reach the Unbelieving World*.

sinful nature with the pleasures of a non-Christian society while attending worship services on the weekends attempting to enjoy the comfort and power of being connected to Christ by faith. Kent Hunter, the Church Doctor, is a well-traveled Christian author and speaker. He is also a culture expert and analyst who serves as a church consultant. In a recent speech he observed that there are five reactions to culture:

1. Retreat. Pick a time in history when all was well, and live in it.
2. Ignore. Pretend that people really do want the pipe organ only. All the time.
3. Judge. Loudly condemn all as sin, and all as sinners. Shrink and die.
4. Preserve. Hold to existing church culture, seating, mechanisms and structures.
5. Engage. Consider Jesus talking with the woman at the well—and do that.<sup>16</sup>

Synod leaders in the WELS, especially since the 1970s, have been trying to figure out how to properly engage the new American culture from a Confessional Lutheran perspective, or at least help people cope with noticeable changes in the church and culture. Seminary professor James F. Korthals provides perspective for today's adjustment to culture based on adjustments and changes required during the Lutheran Reformation. Korthals states, "Change is not necessarily a bad thing—even for a church. Thomas Aquinas is reported to have said, 'If the primary aim of a captain was to preserve his ship, he would keep it in port forever.' Every now and then God stirs up the world, creating (or permitting) the kind of sweeping change that alters what was commonly accepted. The Reformation was certainly one of those times. The Reformers were faced with a challenge. What should they change and what should they leave alone? In

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<sup>16</sup> "The Five Postures Toward Culture" delivered at St. Mark Lutheran Church by Kent Hunter, Green Bay, Wis. August 2, 2005. This was an oral presentation by Dr. Hunter. The five points are used by permission.

looking at how the Reformers addressed the question of change, we can evaluate our own view of change.”<sup>17</sup>

Others in the synod are in various modes of dealing with culture by retreating, ignoring, judging, and preserving. Some congregations are split or splitting over the “how do we deal with the culture?” issue. Often, the pastor, the church council, the established members and new members are on completely different pages.<sup>18</sup> Some in the congregation are primed to engage the culture; others are horrified by the thought. Still others would like to make adjustments and engage the culture, but do not know how to do it. Some are afraid to move because they do not want to disrupt the good the congregation is doing or, God forbid, tear the congregation apart. Others do not move for fear of violating long-accepted applications of church fellowship doctrine or other teachings of the Bible.

For a host of reasons, it has been difficult for the WELS as a whole to make necessary changes which would help it properly interact with the non-Christian culture. Some, but very few, were learning to interact with the changed American culture. Leaders in the effort to engage the culture were difficult to uncover in the WELS, and, years ago, it was not generally accepted to look outside the WELS to seek advice or assistance with church problems.

Following the split in 1961 with Missouri, the WELS declared, “Every state by 78.”<sup>19</sup> But even this noble outreach effort was tainted with a sense of “let’s preserve the

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<sup>17</sup> James F. Korthals, “How the Reformers Dealt with Change in the Church,” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 102 (Spring 2005): 102.

<sup>18</sup> WELS Parish Assistance full-time and part-time lead consultants have noted this philosophy split for years. It is well documented in written congregation reports. (Reports are not available without consent.)

<sup>19</sup> Following the breakup with the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, the WELS was unsure if it could stand on its own. Pastor Norm Berg and synod home missions established WELS congregations in every state between 1961 and 1978.

WELS.”<sup>20</sup> This first large-scale organized effort to cast the WELS out of its Midwest-based conclave into the continental United States was a great blessing from God and an important step in WELS history. However, for the most part it was not a successful effort to provide the WELS with a working model of how to interact with the rapidly changing American culture.

Instead, as it turned out, many of the new churches planted on the expanding WELS frontier in those days were a direct result of reaching recently scattered midwestern German Lutherans, or reorganizing conservative (disgruntled) Missouri Synod Lutherans into congregations—with a little outreach on the side. However, one important lesson has been learned by many since 1961. The WELS has discovered the true challenge of properly and fully engaging a fast-paced, mega-changing American culture, and found how difficult it is to do genuinely cross-cultural ministry.

Finally, another WELS response to culture is to wonder why people even think about such things as culture shifts and how they do or do not affect a local church ministry. After all, we in the WELS have the pure gospel truth. Just preach it, and all will be well. But all is not well in the synod.

For the most part, the heart language of the WELS culture is not the heart language of the American culture. The WELS is speaking, but not many are in close enough proximity to hear when they do. Those true non-Christians who care enough to stop and listen often consider “WELS-speak” a foreign language. They check their dictionary for words like Lutheran, sanctification, and narthex. They have heard of the Bible, but not the Old Testament or the book of Job.

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<sup>20</sup> WELS pastor (name withheld), interview by author, 1 August 2004.



Someone moved the cheese. Everybody went over by the cheese. Will the WELS stand still and call everybody back to where the cheese used to be? Or will the WELS go over to where the cheese is now?

## CHAPTER THREE

### STRUGGLES WITH LEGALISM

The LORD is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him; it is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD.

Lamentations 3:25-26 NIV

Legalism is using the law to accomplish what only the gospel can rightly do.

“The sad fact is that almost all aberrations in the teaching of sanctification are both antinomian and legalistic at the same time. They are legalistic in that they set up some other standard in the place of God’s law as the measure or method to sanctification.”<sup>1</sup>

Jesus upheld the law of love, but despised legalism. The Law of Jesus was simple.

“Love God above all things, and love your neighbor as yourself.” (Matthew 22:37, 38).

Jesus turned on those who practiced and promoted legalism. “Woe to you Pharisees, because you give to God a tenth of your mint, rue and all other kinds of garden herbs, but you neglect justice and the love of God. You should have practiced the latter without leaving the former undone.” (Luke 11:42). Consider the reactions of the Pharisees as Jesus’ disciples picked grain on the Sabbath or as Jesus healed a man with a shriveled right hand (Luke 6:1-11). The Apostle John summarizes proper gospel motivation with these simple words, “We love because he first loved us.” (I John 4:19). Jesus does not call for right behavior for wrong reasons. Jesus is not into manipulation on any level to produce good works. God’s love for sinners is all that is needed to make a disciple of Jesus—nothing more and nothing less.

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<sup>1</sup> Brug, John F., “The Lutheran Doctrine of Sanctification and Its Rivals,” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 101 (Summer 2004): 203.

The potential for legalism which Jesus faced is ongoing and real—even in an orthodox church body. August Pieper, a frequent contributor to the *Quartalschrift*<sup>2</sup>, wrote several essays on Church and Ministry between 1910 through 1920. In his articles he warns against legalism. Pieper’s views “grew out of Koehler’s historical work and its protest against any legalistic mentality which looks for permanent rules of church and organization within the New Testament. Koehler asserts that the particular forms of Church and Ministry which we have inherited (focusing as they do upon the local parish and the parish pastor) were themselves historical developments and must be assessed as such.”<sup>3</sup> Leigh D. Jordahl, head librarian and professor at Luther College in Decorah, Iowa who edited the history of the WELS by J. P. Koehler, comments on legalism, “Lutherans alone, of the ecclesiastical movements of the day, refused to absolutize any forms of polity or ceremony. Behind this refusal was the profound instinct that the Gospel’s purpose transcends the creation of particular forms or liturgical rubrics or social conventions or methods. Any forms which make for the free and authentic proclamation of the Good News and which effectively nourish Christian faith-life are usable forms in their own time and place.”<sup>4</sup>

It should not come as a surprise that Satan would attack the WELS with legalism issues at this point in its history. As God’s people, we are not unaware of his schemes (Ephesians 6:10). The WELS is a doctrinally close-knit church body and has worked hard to stay that way. Before 1961 the WELS was a small Midwest-based German Lutheran church body where members were interrelated to a high degree. Uniformity

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<sup>2</sup> *Quartalschrift*: The first official theological journal published by Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary.

<sup>3</sup> Leigh D. Jordahl, introduction to *The History of the Wisconsin Synod*, by John Philipp Koehler (Sauk Rapids, Minn.: Sentinel Printing Company, 1981), xix.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, xvii.

was highly valued. After struggling with the Missouri Synod through the 1961 split, some in the WELS have become hypersensitive to church fellowship issues. (If subtle doctrinal drifting could infect the Missouri Synod, could it not happen in the WELS also?)

Because of the close focus on Romans 16:17,<sup>5</sup> some WELS leaders have neglected to pay close attention to the greatest spiritual gift of love or to the biblical command to “love one another,” or for that matter, have left for dead most of the “one anothers” of the Scripture. Instead they have chosen legalism as a ministry focal point. Instead of loving people by doing everything possible (not sinful) to save their eternal souls, they have given a narrow focus to “love thy neighbor.” They believe that if we truly loved someone we would give them pure doctrine and turn them toward WELS Lutheranism. They have appointed themselves as the WELS church fellowship police.

Legalism is a quick and easy response to a complex, fast-changing world. However, as Jesus taught, the Lutheran Confessions reflect,<sup>6</sup> and every WELS pastor believes, thoughts, attitudes, and actions of legalism are sin. Legalism is a godless response which harms God’s Kingdom. In spite of this, some in the WELS have been drawn to the legalism response. The legalism response is quick and requires little thinking—a knee-jerk reaction to a specific situation will do.

Germans treasure order like the English treasure afternoon tea. It shows in their orderly approach to theology. A place for everything, and everything in its place. God has blessed us with systematic theology, a system perhaps unmatched in twenty centuries

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<sup>5</sup> Romans 16:17 states that Christians are to “mark and avoid those who cause division.” This verse and others like it are memorized by almost all confirmands in the WELS. Many papers and articles and several books have been written in the WELS on the subject of church fellowship. See Appendix Two for a summary of WELS church fellowship teachings.

<sup>6</sup> Article XV of the Apology of the Augsburg Confession and Article X of the Formula of Concord.

of Christian history. *Reine Lehre* is our great heritage. Theological order in doctrine and practice throughout an entire church body is a rare (and, for most, perhaps unimaginable) gift from a loving God. Yet this prized gift, which is our greatest strength, can be our greatest weakness. Theological order taken to sinful extreme is legalism.

The following letter was written by one of our WELS pastors to one of our WELS church leaders in response to selecting a non-WELS woman as a workshop presenter for an event sponsored by Church and Change:

While, admittedly, your [guest presenter] offers some provocative observations on modern worship concepts, those observations go well beyond the definition of “offensive” and instead reside in the realm of heterodoxy [false doctrine]. To entrust the leadership of such a seminar to someone outside our “close communion” fellowship creates a serious fellowship problem. I urge you to excuse [the presenter] and instead secure the services of a presenter within our fellowship, a man approved (according to Scripture) to teach and exercise authority over men. My concerns being noted above, I would respectfully ask whether or not you have sought and received your district president’s authorization both to conduct this seminar led by a person not of our fellowship, and to solicit the participation of persons outside your district (thereby making the matter one of synodical concern). While I am very interested in the general topic, since I remain bound by God’s Word, by the confessional oath I took at my ordination, and by my conscience I cannot attend your worship seminar as you currently intend to present it.<sup>7</sup>

The written response from the synod leader to these concerns includes four general principles the Conference of Presidents (the twelve district presidents, who are charged with keeping unity in doctrine and practice in the WELS) adopted unanimously in April 1999. These guidelines assist local parish pastors and church members as they steer between legalism and liberalism, keeping all of WELS on the same page as much as possible.<sup>8</sup> In short, the selection of the presenter was allowed to stand.

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<sup>7</sup> A “blind copy” of the letter dated 25 August 2002 was sent to the author by its recipient.

<sup>8</sup> E-mail forwarded to author dated 4 September 2002. A copy of the guidelines is available.

Discussions pertaining to the appropriate application of fellowship doctrine in the WELS are as common as mosquitoes in the Wisconsin northwoods. Today, as in the past, steering between the ditches of legalism and liberalism takes a keen eye and a steady hand. It is a necessary ongoing struggle in any church body wanting to hold to God's truth in the Bible. All must be watchful—members, pastors, leaders. Church history puts on display many who have tried and failed to stay together based on the Word. In the WELS watchfulness toward doctrinal purity, especially as it passes through the concept of church fellowship, is taken seriously, perhaps to a fault.

Every student at the synod's Martin Luther College and Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary is carefully trained in the processes of maintaining pure doctrine.<sup>9</sup> Each student studies the work of past Confessional Lutheran soldiers. Those in charge of the WELS education system believe that such study will help the WELS stay doctrinally unified today.<sup>10</sup> Each knows that failure to hold the line in this area of ministry will bring church discipline from their local circuit pastor.

So much for which to be thankful! There has been unity based on all the doctrines of the Bible throughout an entire church body of 400,000 souls for 150 years! Yet, as WELS, an independent church body born in 1961, struggles to discover its modern style or its biblical reaction to the culture which is its ministry context, like it or not, legalism comes easy.

The Evil One knows about strength in unity based on the Word. He knows that Jesus prayed for unity as a parting gift to his followers (John 17). The devil is rightly

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<sup>9</sup> Martin Luther College (MLC), located in New Ulm, Minnesota, is the undergraduate training college for WELS pastors and teachers. Pastoral ministry students continue their education at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary in Mequon, Wisconsin.

<sup>10</sup> The appendix provides brief biographies of key Confessional Lutherans of the past, especially in Europe, connecting Luther with Walther.

concerned. The WELS is blessed by God and poised to save souls in greater numbers than ever before, partly because of our doctrinal unity. Today, this small Midwest-based Lutheran synod faces the greatest outreach opportunities of its entire history.<sup>11</sup> It has the clear, simple message of Christ in the gospel. People of the WELS are hard-working, tenacious Christians. In their own German way, they care about God and people. The WELS needs to keep double watch: first, that Satan does not sow tares of false doctrine in the wheat, and, second, that he is not allowed to sow tares of legalism either.

In WELS, the voices crying legalism, though in the minority, are clearly heard on either side of most any key issue in the church body (role of men and women, church fellowship, worship styles, small group ministry). One side laments, “My new pastor is forcing us to change everything in our church. It’s wrong to make someone accept change. We do not care for that way of thinking. People are leaving because of it.” The other side retorts, “Our synod is so stuck in its ways. In our church, if we do something twice in a row, it becomes tradition. If we do it three times in a row, it becomes biblical. We do not want that old-fashioned way of thinking. People are leaving because of it. I wish we would get a new pastor who would make changes around here.”

Consider the issue of clapping in WELS worship services. Bland topic? Non-controversial, ho-hum issue? Not in the WELS. Consider this exchange of ideas on the Church and Change listserv. The comments are from two pastors who attended Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary at almost exactly the same time. One wrote, “A fourteen year decline in membership, comfort-zone Christianity sucking the very life from passionate members...a growing concern among laypeople about many WELS pastor’s [failed] grasp of reality in a post-modern world...and some are concerned about clapping

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<sup>11</sup> Dan Koelpin, head of WELS World Missions, makes this point in every world mission presentation.

in worship! Not only does legalism rear its ugly head again staring down on Christian freedom but sheer hypocrisy invades the Kingdom like a cold hand in the exam room.”<sup>12</sup>

The other pastor responded, “Is this group truly about open discussion among brothers and sisters in Christ? Who would dare to disagree with the prevailing sentiment on “clapping” when it is suggested that they might be voicing nothing but “sheer hypocrisy” or that they would somehow be complicit in raising the “ugly head” of “legalism”? If I set up a preferred way of expressing Christian joy (clapping) as always “better” or “preferable,” am I not then in just as grave a danger of legalism (in reverse) as those who forbid my preferred expression any place in the life of Christians?”<sup>13</sup>

The discussion on church clapping continued on the Church and Change listserv for weeks and months. Between WELS pastors this exchange is relatively easy to dissect, digest, and understand. Pastors work with such concepts regularly. Those who choose to put their opinion in writing, both laypeople and professional clergy, are most often mature Christians. They understand that their posts will be fair game for further discussion and potential criticism. For the weak in faith, however, an Internet debate such as church clapping can be confusing and faith harming. Where does my Christian freedom begin—and end? Where does a Bible doctrine begin and its application end? Are WELS pastors united or not? Why do people spend valuable time on “picky issues” when lost souls are dying and WELS congregations are shrinking?

To some degree our relatively isolated church history has made these conversations about application and adiaphora or *mitteldinge* (German term for things neither commanded nor forbidden in Scripture) difficult to have. We, as a church body, have not

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<sup>12</sup> E-mail received by author from Church and Change listserv dated 5 March 2004.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.



been used to having them. In the past, letters to the editor in *Forward in Christ* magazine have provided a forum where application of doctrine may be discussed.<sup>14</sup> Today quick, easy, and oftentimes lengthy discussion of any topic is possible through the synod web site or online forums such as Church and Change or Issues In WELS.<sup>15</sup>

Both mature and immature WELS Christians are not always used to diversity of application of doctrine as they visit or transfer membership in WELS churches. When members observe worship with a band, a woman sharing a children's message in a worship setting, non-member weddings or funerals being conducted—all in WELS churches—their hearts may become anxious.

Local pastors or members sometimes find themselves longing for the good old days when all WELS churches looked and sounded alike in terms of the roles of men and women or church fellowship or worship style. In the good old days, people did not have to think so hard about applying unchangeable doctrinal truth. Applications, at least in small-town American WELS congregations, were almost always the same—at least as far as a WELS visitor could see in a visit or a chat with a WELS Christian friend. Now, it seems that pastors, members, and church leaders are being challenged to think about their applications to doctrine in their local churches and across the entire synod. WELS people are openly pointing to different ways of doing things and asking questions. One response to this new and emerging diversity in the WELS culture is to control it with legalism.

In one midwestern congregation a one-page policy titled “Principles and Guidelines for Wedding Services” states: “We do not make an artificial distinction between pre-

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<sup>14</sup> *Forward in Christ* is the official magazine of the WELS and a link for synod members to the WELS worldwide.

<sup>15</sup> Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod: [www.wels.net](http://www.wels.net); Church and Change: [www.churchandchange.org](http://www.churchandchange.org); Issues In WELS: [www.issuesinwels.org](http://www.issuesinwels.org).

service, service, and post-service officiants, readers, and musicians...in the teaching and spirit of I Corinthians 14:33-35, the officiants and readers will be men...applause should be discouraged, as it is normally inconsistent with our regular worship practices.”<sup>16</sup>

Consider another issue: “Dear Pastor: On the LutherQuest discussion forum, the name of Christ Church (not the real name) has come up in connection with the following allegation: A woman...had delivered the Children’s Sermon in the Sunday morning Worship Service on three different occasions. Some participants on LutherQuest have expressed the belief that this is not an appropriate practice, and is perhaps sinful, both in general, and as specifically occurred at Christ Church. In the interest of truth, fairness, and learning, I would appreciate it if you could explain the facts of the situation from your point of view.”<sup>17</sup>

There are a number of WELS pastors and congregations who do not follow these principles and guidelines. The members who find out about these discussions ask, “Why the difference?” Sometimes accusations of legalism or false doctrine are used in the answers. At other times a genuine discussion takes place, and an agreement to disagree is the only real answer.

Discussions become more challenging or even confusing when members review the official WELS web site. In part, the official web site response posted to the question about allowing women to conduct a children’s sermon reads, “It cannot be said that WELS allows this, because before getting your e-mail I had never seen or even heard of such a thing being done. It is apparently the act of an individual pastor or congregation, about which we have no information...There is, of course, no reason that a woman

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<sup>16</sup> Paul D. Schleis, “Principles and Guidelines for Wedding Services at First Lutheran, (WELS) Green Bay, WI,” 8 March 2004.

<sup>17</sup> E-mail forwarded to author dated 21 August 2004.

cannot teach children or that adults cannot witness a woman teaching children, but a sermon is not the place to do it. If there is going to be a children's sermon in the service, its purpose is to be part of the service conducted by the pastor."<sup>18</sup>

Another issue currently under discussion is that of non-WELS high school students participating in choirs (and therefore worship services) on behalf of their area WELS Lutheran high school. Several area WELS high schools are going back to their federation congregations who support them and asking what to do. Different high schools are arriving at different conclusions.

Will the twelve district presidents allow Christian freedom to run its course, or will they declare an answer to the question by demanding uniformity? Some in the WELS pray for a "divine fiat" from WELS leaders; others, such as leaders at Wisconsin Lutheran College, do not. In response to inquiries regarding the college's practice of including non-WELS students in its choirs, the following statement was written: "It is our belief that the College has an obligation, in a pastoral and evangelical way, to determine as best we can whether a non-WELS student acts out of weakness of faith or in persistent error (the fellowship doctrine). Evangelical practice means we examine each situation individually. We do not accept what may be considered a "one size fits all" approach...Such an approach runs the risk of mechanical and legalistic application. Mission prospects and non-WELS students do not come with the same level of understanding."<sup>19</sup>

Thinking about the best (or better) ways to apply doctrine, while staying faithful to the truth of God, is never easy. This is especially true in a rapidly changing American

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<sup>18</sup> E-mail forwarded to author dated 17 March 2004.

<sup>19</sup> Mark Braun, "A Statement Regarding Non-WELS Students in the College's Choirs," edited by John E. Bauer, statement of Wisconsin Lutheran College, Milwaukee, December 2002.

culture. It is especially true in a small Midwest-based, close-knit synod where skills of dealing with diversity are little practiced or valued. This is especially true in a church body where doctrinal watch-dogging is a highly valued, rigorously taught, and honed skill. This is especially true in light of the theological papers produced and personal experience with a church body breakup in 1961. No one wants to repeat that history. John Bauer, current head of the CHARIS Institute,<sup>20</sup> states, “A recent situation arising in a congregation in Oregon has left this writer wondering in general about the extent to which Christian freedom can be exercised by congregations and, conversely, the extent to which ‘guidelines’ or ‘brotherly advice’ have become tantamount to prescriptions that inappropriately limit that freedom.”<sup>21</sup>

Bauer provides several specific examples where WELS congregations or individuals made decisions, then were given guidelines by concerned brothers who discover their practice. Here are two examples cited. First, a congregation trained women to distribute Holy Communion to women. This practice was strongly discouraged. Second, Martin Marty<sup>22</sup> was invited to present a lecture in a WELS setting. This was also strongly discouraged. In all cases it was clear that the decision made by the local ministry was not against Scripture, but...nonetheless...such a practice might be deemed unwise, confusing, or worse. In essence, “We’re not saying you can’t, but don’t.”

Unfortunately, there is a clean and simple way to avoid to thinking long and hard about potential new or helpful application of scriptural principles, or teaching patiently

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<sup>20</sup> The CHARIS Institute is a WELS think tank established at Wisconsin Lutheran College. It started under Dr. Mark Braun and later became a full-time ministry under the direction of Dr. John Bauer.

<sup>21</sup> John E. Bauer, “*Anschaungen*,” *CHARIS* 4 (Lent 2005): 3. Retrieved from *CHARIS* web site: [http://www.charis.wlc.edu/publications/charis\\_spring05/anschaungen.pdf](http://www.charis.wlc.edu/publications/charis_spring05/anschaungen.pdf).

<sup>22</sup> Martin Marty is one of the most prominent interpreters of religion and culture today. Author of more than fifty books, he is also a pastor and a teacher, having been a professor of religious history for thirty-five years at the University of Chicago. (Source: [illuminos.com](http://illuminos.com)).

about Christian freedom (Galatians 5:1). That is to make a policy or church law, or in general lean toward, or practice legalism. Making a law or “policy” saves time and, finally, is helpful to people looking for clear, easy, understandable answers to complex situations. Bauer suggests that the WELS answer to challenging situations boils down to “Yes...but no....” He also suggests that a better answer in the WELS might be, “Yes...and....”

The author, in the course of interviewing WELS members and pastors, documented the following: some WELS pastors of the past have taught as application of Scripture truth that “life insurance is a sin because you are not trusting in God to take care of you,” “all suicides go to hell because they did not have time to repent,” and “if you are outside of the WELS, you will go to hell.” Most WELS pastors in today’s world cringe at such thinking, although they would consider themselves in complete doctrinal agreement with all past WELS pastors.

Application of truth, not truth itself, is changing. People in the WELS are not happy campers. They are upset, worried, and angry. They are expressing their ideas and feelings at a higher rate than ever before. That, too, is a culture shift with which the WELS is learning to deal. Stuffing ideas and feelings is not an American cultural norm. Note the emergence of talk radio since 1985. WELS seminary professors understand that the condition of the human heart does not change. It only finds new ways to express itself.

In addressing his students, professor Richard Balge of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary used to say, “It is possible to have correct doctrine in every way, and yet not have the ‘stuff’ of the gospel.” Balge’s warning can pertain to legalism. How important his

thought. Years earlier, following the split with Missouri, Carl Lawrenz, perhaps the most visible WELS theologian at the time, addressed the seminary class of 1961, “You must exercise a special measure of patience and forbearance with misunderstandings, unclarities, and criticisms. [Be] all the more on guard against slipping into methods and procedures that are rigoristic and legalistic.”<sup>23</sup>

Jeb Shaefer, long-time editor of the official synod magazine *Northwestern Lutheran*, warned pastors with these words spoken several times before his death in 1995, “The Wisconsin Synod is becoming more Rabbinic.”<sup>24</sup> Yes, let us be doubly careful to be patient with one another in doctrinal matters. Let us not become more and more Rabbinic in our approach to application of doctrine. It is so easy to miss the mark of perfect love, a love expressed in God’s clear boundaries and Christ-centered gospel freedom.

One WELS pastor refers to the unwritten codes of conduct in the WELS as the WELS Talmud. For some local pastors, doctrine and application-based position papers written by respected seminary professors or church leaders or articles published by the synod’s Northwestern Publishing House are almost quoted as Bible truth to people in Bible class or the church pew. From there, notions of legalism can spread rapidly. When church leaders, pastors, or local ministry leaders who have a different approach to application of doctrine try new applications to unchanging doctrine, people react.

Leaders of Church and Change, those at the CHARIS Institute, and synod program leaders can refer to inches-thick folders of e-mail or snail mail from “concerned brothers in the ministry” whose letters were less than loving. In fact, some letters were said to be

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<sup>23</sup> Carl Lawrenz, “Follow and Serve the Lord with Wholehearted Devotion: The Opening Address Delivered in the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Chapel, September 5, 1961: Luke 9:57-58,” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 58 (October 1961): 230.

<sup>24</sup> Mark E. Braun, *A Tale of Two Synods*, 347.

vitriolic in nature and demeaning, vicious, sarcastic, and mean-spirited. There are, of course, true “concerned brother” letters written in a Christ-like framework. Still, those who would put a chokehold on Christian freedom in the WELS are only an e-mail away.

On entering Wisconsin in the 1800s, Germans lived near Germans, Swedes near Swedes, and Belgians near Belgians. Later, when war struck, it changed everybody basically the same way. When the Depression struck, it affected everybody basically the same way. When telephones, cars, and televisions were invented, they changed everybody basically the same way. As a result, a good idea, which helped deal with these changes, ran rampant through the WELS culture and other mainline denominations nearby.

Our forerunners made good working decisions in terms of application of the doctrines they held dear. Application for their ministry flowed freely from the gospel. Application that worked well in one congregation spread quickly from one congregation to another. The churches, for the most part, were cut from the same cloth. So were its pastors, people, and culture. The American culture surrounding the local WELS churches was in most ways homogeneous and supportive of applications of doctrine chosen by the pastors.

There was no time, cultural context, inclination, or easy mechanism for “application wars” for most of the synod’s history. War was reserved for doctrinal battles. Application of doctrinal tensions are, in many ways and for many reasons, a new phenomenon in the WELS—even today. American culture is diverse, and the WELS has begun the journey toward diversity (tension-filled and unwelcome for some) as it more accurately reflects its culture and seeks to interact with it for the sake of sharing the good

news of Jesus. The Wauwatosa theologians of the 1920s<sup>25</sup> were right: “The legalist is either down and out or sitting on top of the world, despairing or cocksure, while at the same time having hope in Christ; both wrong. Such reaction does not agree with what the law and the gospel are to bring about in the heart of man. Something artificial, yea, untrue, springs forth in man, and this trait disports itself in the characteristics of all legalistic dealings. It is external, mechanical, not ringing true, mixed with ulterior motives, a makeshift for the moment.”<sup>26</sup>

Apostle’s in San Jose, St. Marcus in Milwaukee, and Christ the King (Evangelical Lutheran Synod<sup>27</sup>) in Green Bay, are hardly recognizable as being in doctrinal fellowship. All are healthy, outreach-minded congregations with completely different styles of ministry, members, and worship events. These congregations could not exchange ministry applications without doing great damage. Forcing unity of application in the name of unity of doctrine would result in disaster for all involved. The work of God, so carefully crafted by the Holy Spirit in each setting, would be torn apart. Legalism kills. Following the letter of the law kills.

Should all blindly follow Mark Jeske in his applications of Scripture?<sup>28</sup> Should all follow John Parlow or Paul Kelm?<sup>29</sup> Should all follow Jim Huebner?<sup>30</sup> When we leave

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<sup>25</sup> Primarily August Pieper, J.P. Koehler, and John Schaller, who emphasized that forms of ministry were to flow from the freedom of the gospel, not the law.

<sup>26</sup> John Philipp Koehler, “*Gesetzlich Wesen Unter Uns*: Our Own Arts and Practices as an Outgrowth of the Law,” Reprinted from the Proceedings of the Thirty-fifth Convention of the Evangelical Lutheran Joint Synod of Wisconsin and Other States, August 5-12, 1959, 7.

<sup>27</sup> The Evangelical Lutheran Synod (ELS) is a smaller, Minnesota-based synod with whom the WELS is in fellowship. The history of the ELS Lutherans is based in Norway.

<sup>28</sup> Mark Jeske serves as senior pastor of St. Marcus, inner-city Milwaukee, and is the preacher for the WELS television program “Time of Grace,” which is in the process of going nationwide.

<sup>29</sup> John Parlow serves as senior pastor of St. Mark, Green Bay, Wisconsin. Parlow promotes a full band worship style to the WELS, seeking to reach a younger demographic. Paul Kelm, former full-time WELS consultant, is also a pastor at St. Mark. St. Mark is one of the fastest growing congregations in the synod.

<sup>30</sup> Jim Huebner serves as senior pastor of Grace, Milwaukee. Grace, a downtown congregation, has promoted the classic style of worship known in the WELS, is reaching a younger demographic, and has



the impression that one church model is better than another or we run to produce better results by adopting a new model too quickly, legalism is close by. When we issue guidelines or post “official answers to questions” from WELS leaders, and people wrongly think that the answers posted are in some ways equal to Scripture—legalism is close by. When concerned brothers write brotherly admonitions which are really unloving unloading, legalism is close by.

Look carefully. Out of the corner of the eye, off in the distance, one might catch a glint of light reflecting off the digging tool Satan is using to plant tares of legalism in our garden of wheat. When we notice the father of lies quietly working, and we know his plan to harm our Father’s work, our response must be to say and do something strong and positive. Satan’s seeds of legalism do not belong in our beloved WELS. Satan and his evil seeds absolutely are not welcome. His work must be pulled up by the roots as soon as it appears above ground.

We in the WELS do not want to live by a Talmud, even one of our own making. Instead of hiding behind the easy answers of legalism, let us consider long and hard the proper God-pleasing ways in which we can stay true to God's Word and engage the people of our culture, rather than cut ourselves off from the culture. As we are united in doctrine, let us seek to stay united in the idea that we in the WELS can and need to work together in terms of application of doctrine. Let us keep in mind that even brothers can humbly, lovingly, and respectfully disagree on style or forms of ministry. Let us do all that we can to stay connected to the American culture. That is, after all, where the unsaved live. If that means that our ministries will be diverse, so be it.

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experienced a remarkable turn-around based on the brief work of Peter Kruschel together with the long-term effort of Huebner.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### STATISTICS AND SAD STORIES

May the God of all hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Romans 15:13 NIV

Every Christian church body has problems. Some believe the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod faces a big problem. It is dying—by the numbers. Some might use the ancient proverb, “Death by a thousand cuts.” While the United States is growing (from some 226 million in 1980 to over 281 million in 2000), the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod has declined in adult membership every year since 1990.<sup>1</sup> Comparing the synod statistical report from 1995 to 2003 reveals that 64 percent of WELS churches declined in worship attendance.<sup>2</sup> The WELS church body is bleeding to death as, person by person and family by family, members walk out of their local WELS church for the last time.

Over one hundred thousand people have left the synod in the last twelve years.<sup>3</sup> That number has alarmed some in a church body of four hundred thousand. According to the 2003 synod statistical report, out of 1,259 WELS congregations, 465 had zero adult confirmands, and another 171 had only one.<sup>4</sup> In a report from Parish Assistance to the Board for Parish Services, it is stated that 45 percent of WELS members did not attend

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendix Three for chart developed by WELS Parish Services.

<sup>2</sup> *Statistical Report of the Wisconsin Ev. Lutheran Synod for 1995*, Milwaukee: CCFS Statistical Office, 1995. *Statistical Report of the Wisconsin Ev. Lutheran Synod for 2003*, Milwaukee: CCFS Statistical Office, 2003.

<sup>3</sup> Wayne Mueller, “The Sixth Chief Part—How Christ Distributes His Grace,” presentation given at Appleton Leaders’ Retreat, Appleton, Wis., 14 April 2004.

<sup>4</sup> *Statistical Report of the Wisconsin Ev. Lutheran Synod for 2003*.

worship services even once in the month.<sup>5</sup> How close to the back door are those 45 percent of WELS members standing? Do they have one foot out the door?

An August 2003 press release from WELS Communication Services reported, “[The WELS is] faced with a biennial budget 10% below the already sharply reduced 2002-03 budget. In the past year, the WELS cut 11 world missionaries, 6 home mission pastors, 18 full-time professors and instructors in ministerial education, 8 full-time positions in administration, and 2.5 full-time and 10 part-time positions in parish services. Areas of ministry will likely face further cuts.”<sup>6</sup>

Church leaders and consultants often work with statistics. They can put two and two together. Closer to home in the churches themselves, most WELS members do not feel the reality of problems the synod is facing because they do not regularly see or hear or take time to absorb the numbers. Reality begins to sink in for many as everyday people in churches retell sad stories of missing family members and friends and of dying churches. Statistics do not always get through, but as a sad story is told, people’s instincts tell them something is not right, just as a mother’s instinct tells her that her four-month-old is not feeling well. No one knows how she knows. She just does.

After eight years, one family still has the letter—and the broken hearts to go with it. Their WELS pastor wrote, “You are going to hell as you leave our church family and begin attending the Evangelical Lutheran Church of American congregation.” Their lifelong WELS friends tried to explain what the pastor meant and that he really cared for them, but it was too late. This former WELS family, who rarely missed a weekend in

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<sup>5</sup> Ron Heins, Paul Kelm, and Jason Nelson, “Observations about Ministry Today, Gleaned from the Experience of Parish Assistance,” report to the Board for Parish Services Planning Group, March 2000, 5.

<sup>6</sup> “Synod Targets North American Outreach.” WELS Communication Services press release dated 1 August 2003. Retrieved from WELS web site: <http://www.wels.net/cgi-bin/site.pl?2617&contentID=2385&collectionID=881&seq=5>.

God's house and took full advantage of the Lutheran elementary school, was dead on arrival. Dad, Mom, the sons, their wives, and the grandchildren all died to the WELS. Cause of death? A daughter-in-law could not understand why women in the WELS "had no say" in the church.

Friends wept over the stinging and sudden loss. The whispers were heard in church and out in the small community. "They were such a nice family. Lifelong members. And so faithful." Some watched and silently hoped that by not speaking about it, time would heal all. They thought good Christians should eventually get over sad feelings. We are not to linger over the loss, right? What, after all, could anyone have done?

There was no formal funeral conducted for the dearly departed family, though many in the church grieved over their demise for months, and some for years. The final shovel full of dirt was placed on the grave without fanfare, away from public view, as the pastor filled out the statistical report for the synod. The "backdoor loss" of the Wilson family was dutifully recorded and faithfully reported. The report was duly received and noted by the synod leaders, whose job is to review the reports. "Hmmm," perhaps some pondered at the synod office, "A few less souls on the books for St. Stephen's (not the real name) again this year. I wonder what's going on over there?"

Dry, nonorganic statistics do not tell the whole story. Momentum generated, either growing or shrinking, tends to feed on itself and tell its own story. "Our fathers left us a pretty healthy church. Over 140 years of continuous forward progress for what is now the WELS. But right now we are not doing our sons the same favor. In 1990 something

changed. The WELS peaked at an overall membership of 421,000 souls. For every year since we have declined in membership.”<sup>7</sup>

Some of our church leaders smelled the storm coming. The first serious report on “backdoor losses” was published in 1991. According to the report, only 9 percent of people left the synod for doctrinal reasons. Seventy-two percent left for personal reasons.<sup>8</sup>

Before the birth of the WELS consulting service around 1991, and the year before the fifteen-year numerical slide began, seminary professor John Jeske foreshadowed trouble by describing symptoms of sickness:

Consider the danger signals...On all sides we see disturbing evidence that the spiritual character of our congregations is declining. An unholy and unwholesome emphasis on merely maintaining the organization is becoming increasingly prominent; individually we tend to be satisfied with our own level of loyalty to God and fail to notice our spiritual deficiencies. Even well-founded, faithful criticism draws the reaction of defensiveness and a hurt-pride circling the wagons; a disturbing evidence of how, like chameleons, we have blended in with our secular surroundings is our greed, our never-ending desire for more things. A Christian’s priorities invite hard questions when he is willing to squirrel away thousands of dollars in an IRA or to invest them in a car with every convenience, yet fails to dedicate an honorable and a growing proportion of his income to the Giver of those dollars.<sup>9</sup>

“The symptoms have been popping up for years—spiritually unhealthy families, weak relationships with Jesus, a lack of unity and purpose, inflexible ministry methods...and the list goes on.”<sup>10</sup> This was one of the stated reasons many in WELS

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<sup>7</sup> Jason Nelson, “Men of Issachar,” paper presented to the WELS Conference of Presidents and leaders of Congregational Communication and Financial Support, Chicago, 2002, 5.

<sup>8</sup> Norman W. Berg, ed., “My Brother’s Keeper: A Study of Back-door Losses with Recommendations for Ministry to the Inactives,” a publication of the Board for Evangelism of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1991), 22.

<sup>9</sup> John C. Jeske, “Spiritual Renewal as Faithful Application of Law and Gospel in Today’s Secular Society,” written as a Spiritual Renewal mailing to all pastors and teachers of the WELS, 22 August 1989, 2.

<sup>10</sup> Warren Widmann, “Diagnosing a Need for Spiritual Growth,” *Forward in Christ* 89 (September 2002), 26.

leadership pushed for the establishment of a full-time position of Spiritual Growth Task Force Director. As with any church body, there is no end of spiritual growth work to be done. It is a primary function of a healthy, growing church. But the WELS was falling noticeably behind in the effort. Some in leadership positions could see it happening.

By sharing statistics, stories, and symptoms, I do not mean to say that the synod is literally dying, though some might crunch the numbers, take a good hard look at fifteen straight years of numerical decline, and utter a prophecy on that basis. It is unthinkable for many (barring a complete takeover of the United States by anti-Christian secular or Muslim forces) that in the next 150 years God would march the WELS completely off the Christian world stage.

Pastor Ron Heins, founder and current leader of the WELS Consulting Service agrees. “I do not believe the WELS is dying. I do believe it is in transition. It is in an honest struggle, based on new realities. There are difficult, painful closings, adjustments and decisions that must be made, but we are not going to die. God continues to bless his Word in our synod. God will keep his promises.”<sup>11</sup> After more than fourteen years of leading the WELS Consulting Service (Parish Assistance), Heins knows the statistics, sad stories, and symptoms as well as any person in our synod. He remains optimistic that God will grow us through the challenges we face.

Warren Widmann, former district president and director of the Spiritual Growth Task Force, concurs. “After interviewing pastors, teachers, staff ministers, lay leaders, and students, twenty challenging issues were identified that are weakening WELS’ ministry and that can be addressed by taking spiritual growth seriously. The condition is critical,

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<sup>11</sup> Ron Heins, interview by author, 19 July 2004, Milwaukee.

but not terminal—as long as WELS members are willing to make a commitment to spiritual growth.”<sup>12</sup>

Again, this author is not suggesting that our synod will literally die a numerical death. (In fact, as is the case with other church bodies, the WELS is experiencing wonderful blessings from God in its overseas mission endeavors.) Rather, the author means to say that broad-based optimism in the WELS is dying. Hope that God will use Confessional Lutherans to accomplish great things in the Kingdom in this generation of amazing opportunity is dying. It is dying at least in the hearts of the many who attend statistically shrinking churches.

As a result, some are going outside the WELS so their soul-winning days do not get wasted. Spiritually mature people want their lives to count for something special and specific in terms of God’s Kingdom—before he calls them home to heaven. They are not necessarily thinking of meeting their own needs by being personally involved in outreach; they want to accomplish the mission God has given them. They even remain Confessional Lutheran Christians in their hearts and minds. However, they wonder aloud if the WELS is in a position to help them do significant outreach in a meaningful way. They want with a great desire to be involved in both personal and large-scale evangelism efforts that truly help meet people’s needs, but they do not see the WELS (or at least their local pastor or congregation) on the same page. So they take their sad story, personal resources, and passion for outreach (generated by the gospel preached in the WELS) out the door with them. In a church body where 64 percent of its congregations have experienced decline in worship attendance, it is difficult to convince those on the fence

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<sup>12</sup> Warren Widmann, phone interview by author, 14 July 2004.

that WELS is serious about its God-given mission and will do whatever it takes (in North America) to reach the lost.

What has changed? One difference between then and now seems to be that today, we have no slogan or goal that has captured our hearts and galvanized us to take serious collective action toward our mission. Following the emotionally charged breakup of the Synodical Conference, the rally cry became, “Every state by ’78.” For better or for worse that mission was accomplished, and spirits ran high. In addition, spirits ran high as the WELS pulled together to send out its first world missionaries.<sup>13</sup>

Today, spirits are running low. Schools in our synod are closing and combining. So are churches, though statistics on churches combining are not kept. Churches with fewer than eighty worshippers on a weekend struggle to keep their full-time pastor. Budgets in local congregations, though increasing, are overwhelmed with rising health-care costs for full-time called workers. Where can a plateaued or shrinking congregation get that money? Several are responding by not sending mission offerings to the synod. These problems are not unique to the WELS. Some take comfort in this fact, but spirits still run low, especially when a local pastor or church leader’s response to the numbers is denial.

One congregation lists average weekend attendance at ninety-six. It supports four full-time called workers, a pastor and three teachers for the school of about twenty students. All backup funds have been tapped. Money is owed to internal reserve funds, bills are not being paid, called workers have been asked to hold their paychecks until additional offerings come in, and the budget is out of balance by more than \$18,000. A few hasty discussions have taken place to consider combining the school with a nearby

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<sup>13</sup> WELS was the first church body to serve the Apache Indians of Arizona. The world mission fields referred to in this context are the first foreign mission fields of Africa and Japan established after the split with the Missouri Synod.



WELS neighbor. The result? This WELS congregation chose to keep its own school open and add a full-time principal. One member said, “I cannot in good conscience continue to give my offering to that church.” That is the sound of hope dying. The situation at that WELS church is not unique.

The flame of hope also flickers as God’s people in our church body hear or read about Christian churches outside our denomination being used by God to reach more people more often. Seeds of jealousy or confusion are sown. You do not have to listen too carefully to hear the thoughts: “They do not have pure doctrine. Why, God, have you chosen them to reach so many lost and hurting souls with the Word of God? Why not us? God, where is the WELS James Dobson or Chuck Swindoll?” Others may be thinking back to the days of Martin Luther. Where is our modern-day Luther? You can almost hear the voice of the judge, Gideon, “If the LORD is with us, why has all this happened to us? Where are all the wonders that our fathers told us about?” (Judges 6:13). Either way, the flame of hope is in trouble.

Some of our WELS members observe the far-flung Christian world, which has been advancing the kingdom in growing numbers, and, at least subconsciously, compare that to what they see happening in the WELS. Their conclusion? “WELS will never grow in numbers like that.” You can almost hear the fffffssssstttt sound as the air goes out of the WELS balloon. Or is that the sound of a death rattle in the chest of a dying synod?

Jason Nelson, former full-time lead consultant for Parish Assistance, does not hear a death rattle. He hears a knock on the door—it is opportunity. “One of the positive trends

of the post-modern world is that the natural knowledge of God is busting out all over the place and spiritual expression is now socially acceptable.”<sup>14</sup>

Think about it. Does the WELS not have the same Bible, the same God as James Dobson, Chuck Swindoll, or Billy Graham? Has not God showered our synod with considerable spiritual and intellectual gifts, a wide variety of personal experience and talent—and *Reine Lehre*?

Yes. Yet in spite of God’s abundant blessings, our synod has managed to keep our Confessional Lutheran gospel light under a bushel basket for, lo, these many years. In North America our brand of Christianity sits quietly on a high, unreachable shelf. It is dusty and unused since the time of the Reformation, and for the most part hidden from the struggling, ever more secularized American society.

According to our Lord Jesus, who cannot lie, a mindset that would put his blessings on a shelf leads to death. “You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men” (Matthew 5:14).

Lord, have mercy on us for not aggressively dispensing to our sick and dying (i.e., eternally damned) neighbors the medicine you have freely given to us. Lord, have mercy on us for not being salt and light. The fact that most of our WELS members care more about themselves than their hell-bound friends is our biggest problem. We are salt losing its saltiness. We are light growing dimmer.

The Report to the Twelve District Conventions of 2004 states, “These have not been happy days for our church body as we face the sadness of calling missionaries home, disrupting the hearts and lives of faithful servants, and reducing the needed manpower in

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<sup>14</sup> Jason Nelson, “Men of Issachar,” 1.

unchristian countries. Time-tested plans of missiology have been altered and reduced in Southeast Asia.”<sup>15</sup> How much longer will the WELS be able to support seventy-one world missionaries in twenty-three countries?<sup>16</sup> Only a year after this report was issued in 2004, the WELS could support only fifty-seven world missionaries in 2005.

Some say that statistics, sad stories, and symptoms can be twisted to tell any tale. In the WELS, as with any organization, perhaps the statistics cannot tell the whole story. However, they do leave an impression.

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<sup>15</sup> *Report to the Twelve Districts: Proclaim Peace through Jesus*, Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, June 2004), 48.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

## CHAPTER FIVE

### ACCUMULATED EMOTIONAL PAIN

We have been unfaithful to our God...But in spite of this, there is still hope for Israel. Rise up; this matter [of sin] is in your hands.

Ezra 10:2b, 4a NIV

One can see statistics with the eyes. Numbers can be discussed and debated. They can quickly and easily be moved around. If one statistical year is better than the last fifteen or twenty years, one can claim that the corner has been turned. Statistics are unchanging, dead, emotionally safe, and not messy. However, they cannot tell the whole story in a church body or local church family. Numbers do not move anyone to tears, raise difficult questions or talk back. Numbers do not speak of the heartache and emotional pain of people. People have minds, hearts, and souls. They are not numbers. When people become wounded, barriers are built.

The struggles the WELS has been through, especially since the numbers began to drop after 1990, have produced a great deal of emotional pain and suffering. People do not talk about that much. It is important that WELS learns to do an emotional check-up with its leaders, pastors, and members. In a close-knit German-based church body, it may be more popular to discuss the current WELS situation in terms of numbers, rather than in emotional terms. However, in this author's mind, it is equally or perhaps more important to discuss the current WELS situation in emotional terms.

First, members are interrelated. When someone in a local congregation experiences emotional pain because they were wronged by a called worker (or think that they were wronged), many people are affected. Because of the close-knit nature of the average WELS congregation, the pain spreads to more than one person or family at a time.

Second, many of the synod leaders, parish pastors, and school teachers are interrelated, or know one another from going to school together or working together in a previous congregation. When a called worker suffers, many suffer right along with him or her. Again, it is not possible to emotionally hurt one called worker or family at a time. “When part of the body suffers, essentially, the whole body suffers.” How true this is in the close-knit WELS culture.

It is not popular or easy to surface emotional pain, but it needs to be done sooner or later so that true, lasting, spiritual healing can take place. Ignoring the emotional heartache connected with a sustained nosedive in the numbers is not good. If a sales manager saw his sales staff go into a prolonged slump, he might evaluate and adjust the training mechanisms. He would also check in with his sales force to see how they were dealing with the slump mentally or emotionally. It is normal that losses cause emotional pain. Emotional pain, stuffed down or mishandled, can do great damage.

Members of the Parish Assistance team had spoken with the pastor in private. The time had come for them to deliver the oral report to the congregation. Following the report, a woman this author had interviewed came forward. With tears in her eyes she said, “Thank you for listening. Finally, somebody is listening.” The hug and relief in her eyes were genuine.

In the interview process for Parish Assistance,<sup>1</sup> consultants ask for the strengths of the pastor. She had mentioned several. Then, with hesitation, she stated, “We want to work with our pastor, but he won’t let us do anything to help. We’ve spoken with him, or

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<sup>1</sup> Parish Assistance is the consulting service for churches and schools of the WELS. Core elements of the Parish Assistance program were developed by pastors Ron Heins and Paul Kelm beginning in 1992.

tried to. He isn't listening. What can we do to help him? People don't want to get involved anymore. Things aren't going so well."

Sadly, this type of emotional pain is a reality in too many WELS churches. Gifted, spiritually mature members in our church body are frustrated at being left on the sidelines, while professional clergy get burned out because they are involved in real people ministry. Both faithful pastors and faithful churchgoers are suffering heartache over the situation. Neither seem to know what to do. Someone moved the cheese, and no one knows where it is. The conflicting ideas about what to do about that moved cheese have created much emotional pain in the synod. One synod member writes, "This year has been full of challenges for our family. We left the WELS and would still be gone if it weren't for my daughter who couldn't break the attachments from our congregation. We have recently returned with feelings of misgivings. I know God has given me the gift of leadership and I desire to use it. However, I also don't want to bang my head against a brick wall. Thank you for your energy and enthusiasm. It is important for me to see that in the WELS right now, and encourages me that there may be a future for this synod."<sup>2</sup>

The gifted and aggressive laypeople think, "Why won't the pastor let me serve in ways that work for me? I will not get in his way or bother him." The gifted and aggressive pastor thinks, "That's my job. Am I not doing it well enough? What if the laypeople mess up, and I have people streaming into my office asking questions I can't answer?"

Sometimes the pastor encourages laypeople to fully organize, be aggressive, and lead their own personal ministry. However, the meetings required to gain approval for a new ministry in the church often break the spirit of even the most persistent layperson. Parish

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<sup>2</sup> E-mail forwarded to author dated 13 September 2004.

Assistance interviews across America consistently discover this issue along with the emotional pain connected to it.

In addition, emotional pain is generated because people's talents are not being used in a way which brings "ministry joy." Unused or misused people in a church tend to focus on their own needs and wants. When the church does not meet their self-absorbed needs, they experience emotional pain—and they spread it around like a virus in the body. Those who are not busy with the Heavenly Father's agenda usually substitute their own. Often, their personal agenda for their life or their church is not helpful to the kingdom of Christ. Unused people sometimes have a mantra which sounds like this, "They will never let you do that. It is impossible to get any idea past the church council. I've tried." These are the words of a person who is emotionally wounded.

As with any group of people, the list of ways in which emotional pain and suffering can be, and often is, inflicted on one another is not short. Following are a few noteworthy ways in which emotional pain has been inflicted in the close-knit WELS system:

Emotional pain and fear emerge when local pastors are heavy-handed. Consider this warning for WELS pastors raised by one of its current seminary professors. "Even though some monasteries served as hospitals of their day, self improvement was the controlling factor, not a love for people or a love for the Savior. We face similar temptations as pastoral leaders if we strive to build the best church for the sake of the institution. When we don't listen to our people and we lead from the top down with the

desire to rule our people rather than lead our people [as a] humble servant described in God's Word. It is all about attitude."<sup>3</sup>

The need for such a comment in any church body—for any pastor—is unfortunately obvious. These words are not written in a vacuum. The devil, the world, and the sinful nature have driven any number of faithful pastors in directions they do not want to go. One result is that some of God's people are fearful and anxious because of past experience with overbearing church leaders and pastors.

People have been wounded. Fear and emotional pain come more easily to them than trust and love for their church and its leaders. In a real sense, God's people have suffered abuse in their Christian church family. They were hurt, in many cases unintentionally, by people who were to love, care for, and protect their souls. In abuse situations, over time, dysfunctional behavior results for both perpetrators and victims.

The WELS, along with other church bodies, is experiencing the heartache of seeing a greater number of parish pastors resign from the ministry, both for personal reasons and reasons of sin. The anguish for pastor and people is very real. For those who worked closest with the pastor, the pain is very deep and long-lasting. Some never get over their emotional pain. Some never learn to trust pastors again, at least not to a high degree.

Leith Anderson, himself a parish pastor, describes the situation with these words:

The 1990s have turned out to be a tough time for pastors. The North American church is traveling through a transition period in history. No one knows where we are going. Nevertheless, church members expect pastors to know. [Even in Australia there is trouble.] There are possibly 10,000 Australian men and women who were once in pastoral ministry, and now, for a variety of reasons, are pursuing another vocation. For a few the transition is relatively stress-free, but

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<sup>3</sup> Alan H. Siggelkow, "Pastoral Leadership from the Perspective of Church History," *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 101 (Summer 2004): 169.



for most the emotional and spiritual strain associated with exiting what was intended to be a life-long vocation is considerable. Divorce and suicide rates among this group are high, and up to half no longer worship regularly in any church.<sup>4</sup>

Another group of emotionally wounded in the WELS are those who have been judged harshly for sharing their ideas. This judgmental attitude is sometimes defended by legalism. Many have been judged harshly by their brothers and sisters in Christ who do not agree with a ministry decision or an opinion. “Within denominations there have been controversies over styles of worship, approaches to stewardship and methods of evangelism. Without clear statements of ministerial practice—explanations as to why a congregation does what it does the way it does, pastors and church leaders have sometimes made assumptions and judgments about the ministry of others that unnecessarily foster disunity.”<sup>5</sup>

Fear and emotional pain are part of life in a numerically shrinking church or church body. This is especially true where a judgmental spirit is not challenged by leadership, or where those who insist on serving as a self-appointed judge and jury are not called to repentance. One WELS woman relates that her pastor asked that there be no praying aloud by a woman, especially when men and women are together. This might lead the women to take authority over the men.<sup>6</sup> Responding to the discussion about hand clapping in a worship service related in the earlier chapter on legalism, one WELS member states, “The issue here is deeper than clapping. It really goes to all that has been alluded to by so many that we feel judged when we do something or anything within or outside of our church that is potentially different (not against Scripture, but different than

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<sup>4</sup> Leith Anderson, *A Church for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, 71-72.

<sup>5</sup> Paul E. Kelm, “A Theology of Ministerial Practice” (D.Min. diss., Concordia Seminary, 2003), 1.

<sup>6</sup> Stated at the WELS Prayer Institute, July 2005, Green Bay, Wis.

the norm, traditions) or even the same. If you read the letters to the editor in the March issue of “Forward in Christ” [WELS publication] you see these judgments being cast down upon so many...our Christian freedom is wonderful, but our church body (not all) does not always give the impression of this freedom.”<sup>7</sup>

In an atmosphere of judgmentalism and legalism, controversy over worship styles, evangelism methods, or the inadequacy of the local pastor can easily become talking points. The most important talking points about God’s love through Jesus and divine power through the Holy Spirit become less discussed. Members understand that congregation leaders and pastors are to bring God’s forgiveness, hope, and spiritual strength to them through the Word of God. Instead, members see their spiritual leaders wrangle over issues of worship, evangelism, and church polity.

Such wrangling brings confusion and emotional pain, especially if church members see the numbers in their local church dropping. Why not spend all available time and energy on our own problems instead of worrying about what others are up to in other congregations? Mature Christians understand that judgmentalism and legalism offends God, weakens the body of Christ, and is a life-choking weed in the garden of a Christian heart. They do not want anything to do with issues about wrangling over application of doctrine, but their pastor does. This brings emotional pain.

The WELS has great potential for people to hurt one another. It is close-knit. Here are a few examples of people who find themselves in emotional pain—and part of our church body. In the course of a typical friendly conversation, a fellow WELS member shared that their pastor recently resigned their pastorate because of burnout. A second heard a missionary speak with fear, worry, and hurt as brother missionary families

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<sup>7</sup> E-mail received by author from Church and Change listserv dated 5 March 2004.

were removed from the field for lack of funds. A third related the story of a teacher and pastor who could not see eye to eye. As a result, the pastor blacklisted the teacher.

Synod leaders would not step in to assist the hurting teacher. In this person's view, there was no way, especially with shrinking enrollment in synod-operated schools, that this unfortunate single woman teacher could hope to receive another position in her field as a Lutheran school teacher. The subject closed with the words, "No wonder people don't give any money to synod. They [synod leaders] cannot be trusted."

All three conversations took place within twenty-four hours, were unsolicited, and described recent events which were still on the surface of hurting hearts. With lack of good news in our North American congregations, WELS is filling up on heavy doses of hurt. People can debate the reality of the stories as they are shared, but both the perception and emotional wounds are real to the person sharing their story.

It is difficult for both laypeople and church leaders to know which issues to raise and in what way. They understand that raising any legitimate issue can hurt feelings or be misunderstood. Speaking out can cause others emotional pain and heartache. Saying nothing can do the same thing. After reading a summary of the synod convention of 2005, one woman writes, "Where can we contribute to the Lord's work without going through this mismanaged synod budgeting? What can we do about these decisions? Accept these decisions as God's will? See that perhaps our synod is not yet in enough financial trouble to make needed changes? Look for answers by asking questions of people who have power to make decisions? It would be so much easier to not be part of a

church body. This is really not an option I would choose at this time but I understand why some may make that choice.”<sup>8</sup>

It is important in the WELS, as in any setting, that people speak the truth in love, whether it generates emotional pain or not. Following are comments referred to by Pastor Mark Jeske. “I know that there is a law of evolution for organizations as stringent and inevitable as anything in life. The longer one exists, the more it grinds out restrictions that slow its own functions. It reaches entropy in a state of total narcissism. Only the people sufficiently far out in the field get anything done, and every time they do they are breaking half a dozen rules in the process.”<sup>9</sup>

Fear and emotional pain are churning in the stomachs of some WELS leaders, pastors, and members as they read those comments. Tough questions are being asked. Problems are complex. Money is tight. WELS people are searching for solutions. Solutions, however, are not easy to come by or implement. So when someone has the courage to bring up a few good points which may need attention, emotional pain comes. The list of issues which causes emotional pain is never really exhausted. Peter Steinke, a church health expert not of the WELS, states, “The health of a congregation is multifaceted. It is a power-sharing arrangement. Attitudes count. Working together counts. Faithfulness matters. Mood and tone are significant. Healthy congregations certainly foster a caring spirit and encourage a confident tone. At the heart of a congregational life is the Gospel of Christ’s steadfast love, given by God’s Word and

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<sup>8</sup> E-mail to author dated 1 August 2005.

<sup>9</sup> From *Doorways in the Sand* by Roger Zelazny, quoted by Mark Jeske, “Principles of Worship and Applications to Outreach and Multicultural Situations,” paper presented as part of the Church and Change worship conference, Green Bay, Wis., 24 July 2004, 6.

Sacraments. They [the churches] are graced and gracious, generous with each other and outsiders. They are communities of thanks and praise.”<sup>10</sup>

Unfortunately, based on personal interviews conducted by Parish Assistance over fourteen years, together with the findings of the Spiritual Growth Project,<sup>11</sup> the health of the majority of WELS congregations in North America has been seriously called into question. The list of twenty key issues from the Spiritual Growth Project follows:

1. Our congregations and synod have a predominance of spiritually unhealthy families. We see weaknesses in home devotions, and worship attendance etc.
2. There is quite a weakness in the personal devotional lives of our students studying to become full-time workers in the WELS.
3. We found that too often our called workers failed to take time for their own personal Bible study or family devotions.
4. Inadequate interpersonal and management skills have become an obstacle to the gospel. Too many of our current and future called workers struggle in this area.
5. Unfortunately, in many ways we have allowed much talent to remain untapped for gospel ministry.
6. Too many of our congregations suffer from inadequate male spiritual leadership.
7. Too many of our current called workers have a “control mindset,” instead of an “empowerment mindset.”
8. In our synod worker training schools there were real worries about the issues of sanctified Christian living.
9. We’ve not always provided opportunities for God’s gifts and abilities to be used in ministry, or provided training so that those gifts might flourish.

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<sup>10</sup> Peter L. Steinke, *Healthy Congregations: A Systems Approach* (N.p.: Alban Institute, 1996), 19.

<sup>11</sup> The Spiritual Growth Project, directed by pastor Warren Widmann, surfaced twenty issues in the WELS which need to be addressed. The twenty key issues were accepted by the Synodical Council and Conference of Presidents respectively in January 2001 as an accurate assessment of challenges that the WELS faces.

10. We've slipped into over-emphasizing a "corporate church" relationship with Jesus and under-emphasized the personal relationship with him.
11. Too many congregations under-utilize the spiritual gifts of women.
12. A climate of fear exists for too many called workers and members—specifically, a fear of making mistakes.
13. Too many of our current called workers, future called workers and members lack a clear understanding of the mission of the church.
14. Too many students leave our ministerial education schools without a full understanding of both the needs and benefits of flexibility in conducting ministry.
15. An unhealthy lack of unity and / or respect often exists between the people in different forms of the public ministry.
16. Too many members indicate that their pastor's preaching and teaching lacks applications that are relevant.
17. Too many current called workers demonstrate a lack of flexibility in carrying out their own ministry and are critical of others who do.
18. Too many current called workers are conducting their ministry in fear, arrogance, or with apathy.
19. Too often admonishment isn't carried out with a spirit of love and respect, but with a negative critical attitude.
20. Too many called workers view the ministry appraisal (ministry review) process as a personal threat.<sup>12</sup>

Any thoughtful person could take a close look at the WELS and come up with a list of reasons or causes for emotional pain in the system. The lists of these persons might not all be the same. The exact nature of the list, or its exactness, would not change the sad fact that in the WELS, or in any church or church body, there will always be a barrier of emotional pain with which to deal.

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<sup>12</sup> Warren Widmann, project director, "Spiritual Growth Project," 7-13.

Moving forward as individual human beings or church bodies does not simply mean outwardly adjusting behaviors to be more Christian, mouthing the right words, and bumping up the numbers. Truly moving forward for the WELS means paying attention to what is happening to people's hearts, souls, and minds. Are they healing by God's power on the inside? Are they recovering fully from long-term emotional pain which surrounds them much of their lives, even while at church? The Holy Spirit heals with the Word, but healing, truly healing, is never easy.

In too many of our congregations, power struggles exist, there is no confident tone, the mood is sour, there is little connection with healthy Christian churches outside the WELS, and the community of WELS faithful is not reverberating with thanksgiving and praise. Instead of health, in many WELS congregation systems, there is emotional pain mixed with fear. The emotional pain behind the twenty points on this list is almost unimaginable. Yet it is real. It is a formidable, invisible barrier preventing the WELS from making great strides in advancing the cause of Christ in this world.

The laundry list of problems which the WELS wakes up to every day—prisoners of the past, a rapidly changing culture, legalism, sad stories and lousy numbers, unimaginable accumulated emotional pain—is enough to make the WELS consider not getting out of bed at all. What's the use?

As big as any problems might be now, or might become in the near future, it will not matter. God's people in the WELS cannot be separated from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8). No matter how many problems WELS faces, it will not matter. For God can do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine according to his power which is at work within us (Ephesians 3). No matter how challenging the

issues, or impossible changing things may appear, it will not matter. Where does help for the WELS come from? Our help is in the name of the LORD, the maker of heaven and earth. He will not let your foot slip (Psalm 121). Look at the stars. Our God made them. He loves us. He is bigger than any problem, real or imagined.



## PART TWO

### THE WELS SERVES A BIG GOD

## CHAPTER SIX

### GOD'S RESCUE OPERATIONS

Where does my help come from? My help comes from the LORD, the maker of Heaven and earth. He will not let your foot slip...The LORD watches over you.

Psalm 121:1-3 NIV

Throughout human history, people have been busy getting themselves into trouble. God has been busy getting them out of it. The story of human infidelity and God's faithfulness begins in the book of Genesis with Adam and Eve. Our hero and his wife, under the attack of Satan, separate themselves from their loving Father through disobedience. Thankfully, their faithful and merciful creator sent out a search and rescue party of one—himself. God entered a spiritual war zone, putting himself in harm's way for the sake of his ruined creation.

Adam, once God's golden boy, now blames God for causing his problem of disobedience. Eve blames Satan—but it is too late. The damage has been done. In spite of Adam and Eve's rebellion and self-centered attitude, the Father announced his plan to restore the broken relationship between God and his creatures (Genesis 3:15).

Since the fall of the first family, nothing has changed. People get themselves into trouble; God comes to the rescue. In fact, God's book of amazing rescues closes with the final and greatest rescue operation of all. The first and most ferocious enemy, Satan, is overcome. "And the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur...[He] will be tormented day and night for ever and ever" (Revelation 20:10). Our all-powerful God is in the rescue business. His rescue operations include what some people call revivals.

Bible scholars who study revival differ on what might constitute a normative list of biblical revivals. In 1937, Wilbur M. Smith referred to sixteen biblical revivals.<sup>1</sup>

Although there are relatively few books which deal exclusively with the theme of biblical revival, even Wilbur Smith's list of sixteen is not commonly known among Christians of today. His list may be considered good but not normative.

The biblical and extra-biblical examples in this chapter are not intended to demonstrate revival efforts in the strict or scholarly sense. Rather, these stories are intended to fit the broad category of God's rescue operations. The point of these rescue operations is to demonstrate the heart of God to save his people. We note also God's ability to save, his creative or unpredictable methods to save, and his method of often (but not always) choosing one person to begin, coordinate, or lead the rescue process.

### **God's Greatest Rescue Operation of All Time**

Jesus, according to the Bible, was not an ordinary human being. Jesus was God himself. He took on flesh and blood and single-handedly executed the most meaningful rescue operation of all time. The angel said to Joseph in a dream, "You are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21). That is exactly what Jesus did. The Apostle John tells us, "The blood of Jesus, God's Son, purifies us from every sin." The stains and spots of our original sin, sins of omission, and sins of commission have been scrubbed clean by the blood of Jesus.

Jesus did even more for us than shed his blood. Heaven is a perfect home. Imperfect people like us do not belong there. Jesus as true God and true man lived a perfect life under the law as our substitute. The perfect life of Jesus, that is the white robe of his

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<sup>1</sup> Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Revive Us Again: Biblical Insights for Encouraging Spiritual Renewal* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 3.

righteousness, was placed on us at our baptism. Through faith in what Jesus has done for us—a faith given us by the Holy Spirit at baptism (Acts 2:39, 2 Timothy 3:15)—the Father sees us as worthy to enter his perfect home.

In addition to securing eternal salvation for every human being, Jesus revealed his desire and power to rescue hurting people from all kinds of tough times in this veil of tears. Jesus fed thousands (Matthew 14 and 15). Jesus raised the dead (Luke 8:54). Jesus healed entire towns (Matthew 14:35, 36). Jesus gave sight to the blind (Matthew 9:29). Jesus cast out demons (Mark 5). Jesus prayed for individual people whom he knew and loved (Luke 22:31). Even while being crucified, Jesus kept to his mission to rescue lost souls (Luke 23:43). Is there anything Jesus would not do to rescue his fallen and hurting creation? The answer, of course, is no.

Even after his departure from this world, Jesus made every provision for his people. He prayed for them (John 17). He sent back the Holy Spirit to them (Acts 2). He empowered them with specific gifts (Acts 1:8, Ephesians 4:7, 8). He inspired the Apostle Paul and others to write letters to struggling congregations to help keep them on track (1 Corinthians). And finally, as God's seven churches of the New Testament were last seen struggling to cling to his unfailing love, God provided absolutely clear instructions, through his beloved friend John, on how to get back home (Revelation 2, 3). Again, is there anything Jesus would not do to rescue his fallen and hurting creation?

The simple (true) Bible stories about Jesus, which many of us learned as children, reveal all we need to know in order to get to our eternal home and get through our adult-sized problems in our homes here on earth. We need to depend on God at all times, in every situation. God is real. His love is real. God's desire and ability to rescue his

people is an unchanging foundation upon which we can build our lives, our families, and our personal ministries. God can and does rescue fallen, helpless, ordinary people like us. The living Jesus is the living proof.

### **God Uses Ordinary People for His Rescue Operations**

God has no “super-saints” with which to work. In a sense, everybody he uses to rescue people from the grasp of unholy angels is ordinary. Elijah was a man just like us, so says James. That did not stop God. He often chooses to use ordinary people in extraordinary ways. Elijah prayed, God’s fire fell from heaven, and the prophets of Baal were undone. Israel was turned around in an instant (I Kings 18:36). God, the Holy Spirit, told Phillip, the evangelist, to stay near the chariot of the man from Ethiopia. When his rescue operation was done, the Spirit put him elsewhere (Acts 8:39). Our mouths fall open in amazement as we see God at work in the Scriptures.

Most of the time, however, there is no divine “crash and flash” in the operation. Instead, God quietly prepares a servant well in advance, knowing what will take place. God’s rescue operation takes place over time quietly, efficiently, and with little or no divine fanfare. God is no less there, working, guiding, rescuing. The entire book of Esther is one such story in Scripture. There are others.

The fledgling people of Israel faced a severe famine in the land. Yet God’s solution was well under way. The Almighty had placed Joseph in an Egyptian prison, exactly where he was supposed to be. The right man, in the right place, at the right time. The sight of Goliath froze the entire Israelite army in their tracks. Yet God had prepared a shepherd boy to break the stalemate and chalk up an impressive victory for his people. The Philistines were thumbing their noses at God’s Holy people. God raised up Sampson

to come to their aid (Judges 13 ff). God used Noah to rescue the human race and all the animals. (Genesis 6 ff). God used Josiah to rescue the Word of God (2 Kings 22, 23). God had even sent a prophet to predict Josiah's reform (I Kings 13:2). God used Rahab the prostitute to rescue the two spies (Joshua 1:14). Looking back, a person can clearly see the hand of God. At the time, however, everything seemed unpleasantly normal as people worked through the situation. God was using ordinary people in ordinary ways and in some extraordinary ways too.

As a biblical example, pattern, or paradigm of revival and reformation in the classic sense, consider Nehemiah, the statesman. There is no doubt that God's people were in need of a change of heart on the inside and a change of situation on the outside. The people of Israel were in captivity. Their former capital city, Jerusalem, was in ruins. God opened the eyes of the heart of Nehemiah to clearly see and be concerned about the needs of his people. Nehemiah fasted and prayed before he did anything else. Nehemiah carefully developed and executed plans (praying throughout the process). God's hand was with Nehemiah, especially as he faced opposition. Nehemiah clearly gave God all the credit for the amazing accomplishment of rebuilding the city walls of Jerusalem in fifty-two days (Nehemiah 6:15).

Prayer and directive leadership from a few ordinary people were features of the revival under Nehemiah. That pattern of using ordinary men and women seems to be repeated from centuries before. During the time of the Judges, "The Israelites cried out to the LORD, and he gave them a deliverer" (Judges 3:15). Read the stories of those whom God chose to deliver Israel in those days. Deborah and all the men are painfully

ordinary human beings. God chose them, enabled them, and used them to rescue his hurting people in answer to their prayers.

Consider God's rescue operations through the minor prophets who called God's ordinary people to revival and reform. How many times is the simple message repeated? Stop sinning! Return to the LORD! Seek the LORD! How many times is the gospel message shared? I will return to you! I will send you help! I am with you! Trust me. I am coming! The words God gave to Zechariah summarize many of the messages: "The LORD was very angry with your forefathers. Therefore tell the people: This is what the LORD Almighty says: 'Return to me,' declares the LORD Almighty, 'and I will return to you,' says the LORD Almighty. Do not be like your forefathers, to whom the earlier prophets proclaimed: This is what the LORD Almighty says: 'Turn from your evil ways and your evil practices.' But they would not listen or pay attention to me, declares the LORD" (Zechariah 1:2-4). Zechariah proclaims the gospel message with these beautiful words: "Therefore, this is what the LORD says, 'I will return to Jerusalem with mercy, and there my house will be rebuilt.'...This is what the LORD Almighty says: 'Many peoples and the inhabitants of many cities will come.' Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, daughter of Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey" (Zechariah 1:16, 8:20, 9:9).

Biblical models of revival are descriptive. They are not prescriptive. They describe what God has done in the past. They do not prescribe a formula which guarantees ready-made solutions to spiritual problems (i.e., revival). By giving us revival stories on the pages of the Bible, the Holy Spirit is not putting himself in a box and handing sinners like

us a key which unlocks his revival power. Rather, God is providing guiding principles of revival which he blesses in his own way and time. Pray! Obey my Word! Repent! At times there is divine “flash and crash” with God’s rescue operations. At other times ordinary men and women only did what God directed them to do, but God blessed their efforts in extraordinary ways.

### **God Rescued the Church of Europe**

In 1483 no one saw it coming. Things seemed so normal in the church, but the visible Christian church of the Western world was in real trouble. Perhaps a few sensed it. Perhaps a few prayed about it or did what they could in their own little corner of the world to revive the believing community where they served. A great rescue operation of God, of biblical proportions? A return to the pure Word and gospel message of second-century Christianity? Such an act of God was unthinkable! If God would be willing to reform his church, certainly such a rescue operation would be years and years away. The church of Rome was so powerful and so corrupt.

The Reformation came out of nowhere. Looking back, however, we can see that God was behind the scenes, sowing seeds of reformation long before the birth of Martin Luther. God is patient and kind. We can trust that he is always working toward rescuing his church. Well before the Lutheran Reformation, God was busy with specific steps of preparation. God raised up a Dominican friar in Germany whose name was John Tauler (ca. 1300-1361). This Dominican friar wrote “Theologica Germanica” which had a profound impact on shaping the future Lutheran Reformation. Almost two hundred years after its publication, Martin Luther would tell his good friend, George Spalatin, in two letters dated December 14, 1516 and May 6, 1517: “It might be useful to put into the



hands of the students, and recommend to them the use of, such simple little books as the writings of Tauler...If you desire to read the old pure theology in German, you can obtain the sermons of John Tauler. Neither in the Latin or in the German language have I found a purer, more wholesome theology or one that agrees with the Gospel...Once again, I beg you, follow me and buy Tauler's book...It is a book in which you will find such a skillful presentation of pure and wholesome doctrine that in comparison all other books, whether written in Greek, Latin, or Hebrew, are like iron and clay.”<sup>2</sup>

About 1377, John Wycliffe, a native of Yorkshire, England, stood up to the Roman Catholic Church. He wrote, “The Church of Rome is not the head of all churches; nor did Peter have any more power given to him by Christ than to the other apostles. The pope has no more keys of the Church than does any other in the priesthood. The Gospel by itself is a rule sufficient to rule the life of every other Christian person on earth, without any other rule. All rules that are made to govern religious people add no more perfection to the Gospel of Jesus Christ than does white color to a wall.”<sup>3</sup>

Jerome of Prague, a scholar wandering through England, picked up the teaching of John Wycliffe and transported it to Bohemia, translating the Gospel of Wycliffe into the Czech language. Jerome worked closely with John Huss, a priest at the University of Prague. Both men were burned at the stake at Constance, Germany for following John Wycliffe's teachings, John Huss in 1415 and Jerome of Prague in 1416. The Bohemian and Moravian people revolted against Rome, clinging boldly to the Gospel message now available to them in their native Czech language.

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<sup>2</sup> Philip Jacob Spener, *Pia Desideria*, translated, edited, and with an introduction by Theodore G. Tappert (N.p.: Fortress Press, 1964), 110-11.

<sup>3</sup> John Foxe, *The New Foxe's Book of Martyrs*, rewritten and updated by Harold J. Chadwick (Gainesville, Fla.: Bridge-Logos Publishers, 2001), 70.

Gospel seeds had been planted by God in the fertile soil of two European universities in two separate countries: Oxford, England and Prague. God had infected both schools with Scripture readers. The Church of Rome was about to become sick. In order for God's Reformation of the western church to occur, all that remained was the invention of the printing press in Mainz, Germany and the birth of Martin Luther.<sup>4</sup>

The work of Martin Luther and the reformers is well known and celebrated among Confessional Lutherans of today. Through the Lutheran Reformation, God restored his Word and its core message of "grace alone, faith alone, and Scripture alone" to wounded, law-oriented, and spiritually oppressed people. Martin Luther brought back the truth of Scripture to everyday people by translating the Bible from the Latin Vulgate of St. Jerome (which was used primarily by the elitists) to the language of the common people of Germany. Luther gave permission and the tools for laymen and women to read the Bible for themselves. He wrote a simple Catechism (still in use today in every WELS congregation) so Christian fathers might teach their families the chief parts of Bible doctrine in their homes after chores. Luther taught basic Bible truths through songs and hymns which the common people could easily remember and share with one another. Yes, in the WELS, the story of Luther's reformation is fairly well known.

Less well known is the story of Matthias Flacius who (humanly speaking) rescued the fledgling Lutheran Reformation from oblivion during the pushback of the massive Roman Catholic Church. Flacius was raised in Venice, Italy. As a young man, Flacius heard the gospel message of the Reformation from Baldo Lupetino. Flacius excitedly went north to study the Scripture in Wittenberg, Germany, under Luther himself.

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<sup>4</sup> Johannes Gutenberg (c. 1398-1468) was a German metal-worker and inventor who achieved fame for his contribution to the technology of printing during 1448.

About four years before Luther's death, on July 21, 1542, Paul III issued the edict "Licet ab Initio" which set the rules of the Roman Catholic inquisition in place. "It appointed six cardinals, among whom Caraffa and Toledo were the first, as commissaries of the Holy See, general and universal inquisitors in affairs of faith on either side of the Alps. It conferred on them the right of delegating similar powers to ecclesiastics wherever they thought fit...They had power to imprison the suspected, and to punish the guilty with death and confiscation of goods...They were to contrive and to execute whatever could tend to suppress the errors that had broken out in the Christian community, and to pluck them up by the roots."<sup>5</sup>

It was in that same year (at age 23) that Flacius journeyed back to his homeland of Venice. His mentor, Baldo Lupetino, had been put in prison for boldly preaching God's gospel and converting an entire town on the island of Cherzo (now Cres), just off the coast of Istria. In spite of personal danger, Flacius delivered letters from the German princes (pleading to save his mentor) to the Roman Church. In spite of these and other efforts, Baldo Lupetino was martyred for his Lutheran faith. Likely, this incident fueled Flacius to fight for the rest of his life not only for pure Lutheranism, but also against the Roman Catholic Church.

When Phillip Melanchthon (Praeceptor Germaniae) began to elevate Aristotle's content and method of philosophy in the University of Wittenberg in 1536, Flacius opposed his elegant and honored teacher. Flacius, along with Luther and Elector John Friedrich, could sense trouble coming back into the church. Pure Lutheranism, with its

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<sup>5</sup> Oliver K. Olson, *Matthias Flacius and the Survival of Luther's Reform* (Wiesbaden, Germany: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2002), 50.

focus on the simple truths of Scripture, should not be lost in a scholarly fog of high-minded philosophy as it had once been lost in a fog of high-minded church rules.

One important test for the preservation of pure Lutheranism took place from November 16-22, 1548. Luther was out of the picture (he died in 1546). Melancthon and several other Lutheran theologians gathered at Cistercian monastery at Alzelle to meet with Roman Catholic leaders. Emperor Charles V was wooing the Lutherans. (Can't we all get along and fight the Muslims together?) His priority for change was not doctrinal. He understood the Lutherans would probably not go for that. Instead, he hoped to have the Lutherans accept the Roman Catholic liturgical forms. Perhaps there were ways to work together as Lutherans and Catholics.

Meanwhile, King Ferdinand (Roman Catholic) was adamant that there be no compromise. The Lutheran theologians were bluntly told that if there were no concessions, Saxony (Southern Germany) would be laid waste by invasion—and they would be denied the income from the monasteries. Under pressure Melancthon and the others broke. “The final document was signed...Fasts were required...authority for excommunication and parish visitation was transferred to government consistories, the general government of the church was surrendered to the bishops and the pope, with the wistful provision that they would not persecute sound doctrine and the true worship of God. Pastors who did not conform would be dismissed from office.”<sup>6</sup>

Upon reading the results of the meeting, Flacius wept. He understood that resistance to Roman Catholic oppression was needed, but those who resisted could lose all that they had. Reluctantly, Flacius resigned his professorship, left behind his ample salary, his expectant wife, and his family, and headed north to where Lutheranism had held fast. He

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 117.

felt God had called him to lead the resistance movement. Melancthon immediately labeled him as incapable of dealing with theological issues and a runaway slave. History has shown that Flacius, an ordinary man by all accounts, provided the oxygen which kept the flame of pure Lutheranism burning bright against the attacks of Satan during those first years after Luther's death.

God had planted a faithful seed in a man from Venice, Italy, within German Lutheranism to save it from destruction. What seeds has God planted in the WELS which will spring up out of nowhere to provide new life for our Confessional Lutheran churches in North America? Which ordinary men and women will God choose to use in extraordinary ways?

### **God Rescues His People Today**

Stories giving God credit for rescuing Christians today are numerous, especially among evangelicals<sup>7</sup> who are comfortable with testimonials. At least compared to WELS Lutheran Christians, evangelicals freely describe miraculous rescues of individuals and local churches and put them in writing. Such amazing stories about God's wonderful help take place among Lutheran Christians too, but are not often put in writing.

Therefore, we will consider two examples of God's modern day rescue operations among non-WELS Christians. (This writer will share a summary of some wonderful WELS stories in Chapters Eight and Ten based on personal observation, some writing, and interviews.)

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<sup>7</sup> Usually refers to a tendency in diverse branches of Protestant conservative Christianity, typified by an emphasis on evangelism, a personal experience of conversion, biblically-oriented faith, and a belief in the relevance of Christian faith to cultural issues. Protestant people, churches and social movements have often been called *evangelical* in contrast to Protestant liberalism. Source: Wikipedia.

The first evangelical rescue story takes place in 1842. The churches of Boston began with their roots in revival along with most of the churches in New England. The Puritans in America hoped to establish a model for their European homeland to follow. Solid Christian roots were put down by men like John Winthrop, Boston's founder. Eventually, however, decline in the churches set in. God was faithful. He blessed the churches with renewal and refreshment in the Great Awakening in the 1740s.

Once again, decline set in. By 1800 the Congregational churches in Boston had renounced the faith of the Puritans. Yet again, in the face of his children's unfaithfulness, God proved himself faithful. One example of God turning things around was the congregation at Salem. By December of 1841, spiritual depression had set in. An attempt was made to resuscitate the Tuesday evening lecture, but the attendance was so very small that after a few weeks' experiment, it was thought to give it up. A brother was appointed to prepare a circular to be printed and delivered to each individual member of the church, calling upon them to consider their covenant obligations and awake to duty. This circular was prepared in manuscript and presented to the church, but the Lord rendered its distribution unnecessary.

At a meeting for devotional exercises, December 24, the third chapter of Malachi was made the theme for discussion. It excited much interest, and we felt there was an unusual spirit of prayer for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. At another meeting the subject of foreign missions was taken up, and most of the brethren present subscribed 50 or 100 percent more than former years. This seemed to be the beginning of the revival...The next Sunday our pastor preached in the morning. It was a solemn melting sermon...the word was made powerful; they were deeply convicted of sin, and soon drawn to the Savior...From this time it became necessary to increase meetings, for four months a meeting was held every evening in the week...the blessing of the Holy Spirit descended upon us mostly through the regular means of grace.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Martin Moore, *Boston Revival, 1842: A Brief History of the Evangelical Churches of Boston, together with a More Particular Account of the Revival of 1842* (Boston: John Putnam, 1842), 50-51.

Through the preaching and teaching of the Word of God, in the fall of 1841 and throughout 1842, the Holy Spirit began to change hearts in an observable way. In almost every parish (including the German Lutheran churches) there was a deepening concern that swept over parishioners regarding their sorry spiritual state. People all over the city from a wide variety of denominations (including the Baptists, who were heavily persecuted by the other Christian churches in those days) were moved with an urgency to pray. The Baptists were moved to “mother” other Baptist churches by sending a group of strong functioning members from their existing church to help birth another Baptist congregation.

Martin Moore makes available “membership growth” in chart form for individual congregations, denomination by denomination, for the year 1842. God’s increase in church membership cut across all denominational barriers. For example, there were 14 Congregational churches in Boston at the time. God blessed these 14 churches with 1,102 new members in one year. Total membership at the end of 1842 was 5004. The nine Baptist churches increased by 1,244 members. The eight Methodist churches added 1,201 members, bringing their total membership in the city to 2,630. Such increase from preaching of the Word had not been seen in Boston for 100 years. God had performed a rescue operation.

The second story of God’s rescue operation is from the pen of Henry Blackaby.<sup>9</sup> The story takes place at First Baptist Church in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada, from 1970 to 1982. First Baptist Church had dwindled to a handful of adult members. The “For Sale” sign had been out front for months. The offerings for March of 1970 were no more

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<sup>9</sup> Henry Blackaby, *What the Spirit Is Saying to the Churches*, LifeChange Books (Sisters, Oreg.: Multnomah Publishers, 2003).

than \$90. The people gathered for prayer meeting, thinking God wanted them to close their doors. Instead, by the time they finished praying, God moved them to try for a pastor one more time. The little flock of God's people called Henry Blackaby of Southern California to be their pastor. God used him and First Baptist to rescue many souls in Canada.

Pastor Blackaby used the Scriptures to change the hearts of the people. Scripture prompted them not to think of themselves first, but God first. What was God's will for their little church? If God brought an opportunity to serve people with the Word, they would trust and obey Him. They would not look at their lack of resources, skills, and talents. They would look to the Bible for strength to reach out with Jesus' love. God led the congregation to start more than ten other churches in those years. God led the church to reach out to a college campus. About 160 students were brought into the ministry. About half of those students offered their lives to full time missionary work. God led First Baptist to begin a Baptist Seminary. In the decade following its inception, more than four hundred students attended. In spite of their small numbers, lack of skill, or strong faith even to exist, God had rescued this group of Christians.

### **God's Creative Genius in Rescue Operations**

Sift through the rescue stories of the Bible. We see God's creative genius shining through the operation. Some of God's rescue operations are immediate. Hezekiah turned his face to the wall in prayer. Before Isaiah the prophet had gotten out of the courtyard, God sent him back with good news (Isaiah 36). Some of God's rescue operations took years. Under Moses, God allowed the children of Israel to wander forty years in the desert before they inherited the promised land (Deut. 2:14,15).



At times God does not expect his people to plan their way out of a jam. He says, "...you need only be still." (Ex. 14:14). At other times God blesses a plan. We recall the situation with Jonathan and his armor-bearer when they attacked the Philistines. Jonathan even laid an "if /then" option before God. God honored Jonathan's idea (I Sam. 14:6). Gideon did the same thing. God accepted Gideon's plan—with modification (Judges 6:36). To David, God said, "Do whatever your heart leads you to do" (2 Sam. 7:3). Both Psalm 1 and 20 indicate it is good to plan. God cooperates with human planning. God may modify and then use human plans. At times God raises up individuals through whom he saves. They do not have a plan. God plans for them. They only follow his clear lead, like Jonah.

God invites his people to participate in his rescue operations through prayer. Elijah prayed a "one time" prayer (I Kings 18:36,37). Fire came from heaven. A revival took place. Jonah preached God's Word. People repented and prayed. God changed hearts.

Isaiah was a willing servant to serve in God's rescue operation. Moses and Jonah were not. God uses both the willing and the unwilling. At times God's rescue operations are unannounced and unwanted, as when the Holy Spirit showed up to help Moses (Num. 11:17,26). At times, as with Noah, God provides advance warning of judgment and rescue (Gen. 6:17,18). At times God gives instructions to "create" revival (2 Chronicles 7:14). God rescued the city of Nineveh with one man, Jonah. On the other hand, God began the process of taking over the promised land with an entire unified people group marching around the walls of Jericho (Joshua 6:7).

God's passion and ability to rescue people are crystal clear on the pages of Holy Scripture. Human beings, however, cannot predict God's methods to save. God has not

boxed himself in. His love and creative genius know no bounds in rescuing his hurting people. At times we will see God coming. Other times we will be dumbstruck when he arrives. One way or another, God will show up to help his people. As he has done in the past, so he will do in the future.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### REVIVAL BASICS FOR CHRISTIANS TODAY

For everything that was written in the past, was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.

Romans 15:4 NIV

The lessons of renewal and revival are broad-brushed, like God himself. In the Scripture God reveals himself as a jealous, all-knowing, all-powerful, all-loving, merciful, and mysterious God. There is no way to figure out God. Therefore, there is no way to fully describe God's actions which bring renewal and revival. God is always at his work of renewing, reviving, and refreshing his people in the visible Christian churches on earth. He called the visible Christian churches into existence. He knows they need help. He provides revival for them in his own time and place and way.

God's renewing work is visible in the Scripture. We can learn from it. In addition, because of God's renewing touch on churches in more recent human history, our God has graciously left behind his fingerprints, which can be dusted and studied. Christian historians can draw basic conclusions about revival by comparing God's renewal efforts from century to century and place to place in the past with what they see happening around them today. God is surely not predictable, yet he is often a God of order, patterns, and cycles.

For example, knowing completely the wayward heart of his people, God provided specific instructions on what they should do when the wheels of their theocracy eventually fell off. God told them, "When I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or command locusts to devour the land or send a plague among the people, if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn

from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land.” (2 Chronicles 7:13, 14). Christian historians can study what happens when God’s people of any age or place follow God’s instructions.

Through a doctor of ministry program *Reform, Renewal and Revival*, this author has drawn several conclusions about revival.<sup>1</sup> These conclusions do not represent a canned formula of results presupposed by the doctor of ministry program at Gordon-Conwell Seminary. Instead of aiming to reproduce revival through a set formula, Gordon-Conwell seeks to create a positive, helpful, academic, and systematic process for study of revival. Students are encouraged to draw their own conclusions, applying fresh understanding to situations in which God has placed them. Again, the course of study does not attempt to provide a predetermined recipe which will produce predictable results in terms of congregational renewal.

Therefore, the following conclusions are the result of the author’s personal application of the course of study to his own ministry setting—the local congregation in which he currently serves (Beautiful Savior Lutheran Church, Green Bay, Wisconsin). These conclusions do not represent Gordon-Conwell, nor do they represent the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. The conclusions stated here reflect the author’s own ideas gleaned from his training and experience as a Confessional Lutheran pastor in the WELS and from the further education process provided by Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.

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<sup>1</sup> Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, Boston, Massachusetts. Doctor of Ministry track under the direction of Garth Rosell, assisted by Bob Mayer. This program draws conclusions and principles of revival in America from an intellectual/historical perspective and assists the students in making application in their own ministry settings.

### **It Is Important to Define Terms**

In the words of former federal judge and Gordon-Conwell advisor, Brent McKnight, “words matter.” What does the word “revival” mean? Words which attempt to capture the amazing, creative, ongoing rescue operations of God recorded in the Bible, or experienced among his Christian people in America, are difficult to come by. How well does the word “triune” describe our indescribable God? How neatly does the English word “is” or the Greek word *koinonia* describe the incomprehensible (mysterious) relationship between the bread and wine and the body and blood of Christ in the sacrament of Holy Communion?

However, since our omnipotent God chose to share his unimaginable grace with human beings through written words, we use written words to describe the term “revival.” This author understands the term “revival” to mean, “God turning weak Christians in unexpectedly large numbers from sin-based apathy to Gospel-based action.” According to this definition the number of people involved in revival would be well beyond the statistical norm of past experience or expectation (perhaps as happened during the revival of 1842 in Boston or Henry Blackaby’s congregation in Canada). Still, there is no exact or universally accepted definition of the word “revival.”

Richard Owen Roberts, a man dedicated to revival, struggles with words and terms. “In a book entitled *Revival*, I gave the following definition of that term: ‘Revival is an extraordinary work of the Holy Spirit producing extraordinary results.’ While that phrase conveys the fundamental concept of revival, over the intervening years I have come to

the conviction that one single word describes revival better than any other—that word is ‘GOD’.”<sup>2</sup>

Walter C. Kaiser, Hebrew language scholar and former president of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, makes a distinction between revival and reform. He quotes the following definition of revival by Stephen Olford: “Revival is the sovereign act of God, in which He restores His own backsliding people to repentance, faith, and obedience.”<sup>3</sup> Kaiser distinguishes between reformation, (a change toward outward moral, God-pleasing behavior), and revival, (which begins as repentance in a wayward heart).<sup>4</sup> An awakening is a term which describes spiritual renewal across different regions, denominations, and even a nation. In technical terms an awakening should not be confused with revival or reform.<sup>5</sup> Revival and renewal describe a change in a believer’s heart. Conversion and evangelism, by definition, refer to a change in an unregenerate heart. Again, in technical terms, increased evangelism efforts flow from a revival but are not usually considered part of the revival itself.

A revival occurs when Almighty God revives (greatly strengthens, fixes, arouses) the “weakened body” of believers, and then they more diligently pursue God’s agenda of evangelism. Richard Owen Roberts concurs. “Historically, this term [Awakening] has been used interchangeably with the term revival. In the eighteenth century, for instance, the work in the United Kingdom was called ‘The Evangelical Revival,’ whereas its counterpart in America was dubbed ‘The Great Awakening.’ But in recent years there

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Owen Roberts, “What Is Revival?”, article in *Herald of His Coming* newsletter, Internet Edition, June 2006. Retrieved from *Herald of His Coming* web site: <http://www.heraldofhiscoming.com/other/home.htm>.

<sup>3</sup> Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Revive Us Again*, 7.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 90.

<sup>5</sup> Garth Rosell, class lecture, Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary, Charlotte, North Carolina, January 2004.

has been a wise attempt on the part of many thoughtful believers to use the word ‘revival’ to describe the work among God’s people and the term ‘awakening’ to describe the effect of a ‘revived people’ on the world of sinners. In other words, when many believers are revived many unregenerate are awakened.”<sup>6</sup>

The WELS terminology that most closely matches the term “revival” as it is used today seems to be “spiritual renewal” or “spiritual growth.” WELS leaders and members began to formally discuss the concept of “spiritual renewal” about 1983.<sup>7</sup> Since the beginning, “revival” nomenclature in the WELS has been fuzzy. The words “revival” and “awakening” were mostly unused in Confessional Lutheran circles. Because words mean things, especially previously unused theological terms, the words “spiritual renewal” were debated in the WELS. The term “spiritual renewal” was not universally accepted or stamped with a synodical imprimatur. Some WELS pastors disagreed with the concepts of spiritual renewal and muddled terminology in speaking and writing.<sup>8</sup>

Lack of clarity of terms has caused an escalation of misunderstanding in the WELS. The “spiritual renewal” term became (in the minds of some pastors and members) a stained equivalent to the term “church growth.” In some people’s thinking, the term “spiritual growth” easily slid over to the term “spiritual revival.” For some in WELS, the term “revival” conjured up pictures of speaking in tongues, rolling in the aisles, or stadiums filled with weeping sinners headed for the make-shift altar determined to give their life to Christ (and get saved)—or worse, experience charismatic healing and bark like a dog. As a result, one rarely sees the term “revival” used in a positive sense in the

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<sup>6</sup> Richard Owen Roberts, “What Is Revival?”

<sup>7</sup> According to interviews, the term was coined by a group of pastors who met monthly for about two years in Milwaukee to discuss the struggles of congregational life. Some of these men made a proposal to the synod in convention in 1983, using the term “spiritual renewal” officially, for the first time in the WELS.

<sup>8</sup> Ron Roth, interview by author, 21 July 2006, Milwaukee.

WELS. One former WELS leader summed up this fear with these words, “We are so focused on justification—and so afraid of *Schwermer*.<sup>9</sup>”

Many Christians are unclear about the meaning of the terms “revival” or “renewal” or “reformation,” because they do not carefully clarify the meaning of terms which they use. Once clarified, they do not share the definitions often enough to make them stick. When others misuse (or redefine) the terms they are using, they do not challenge them. Therefore, words like “revival” and “awakening” may conjure up more emotional reaction than logical analysis. This is not only a WELS problem. Non-WELS Christians are also concerned that revival be “real and pure” and tied to the cross of Christ. The following call to revival reflects this concern: “Revival springs from the cross. Dishonor that, and God hides himself. Put the cross aside, in the deep magnificence of its meaning, and the Holy Spirit withdraws his power. May the restraining of revival not be the result of a broken-down altar, a slighted cross, a silence regarding the great and full message of the death of the Son of God? The Church, to a large extent, has lost her vision of Calvary, and is becoming blind to the magnitude of her loss. The cross needs to be brought back to its right place in our theology, to understand its meaning, and proclaim fearlessly its fullness of victory.”<sup>10</sup>

Taken at face value, this call to revival is not all bad to Lutheran ears. There is a reformed flavor to the call. Yet calling people back to the cross of Christ—especially in mega-church Madison Avenue-based congregations—is a good start.

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<sup>9</sup> Ron Heins, interview by author, 19 July 2004, Milwaukee. *Schwermer* is a German word used by Luther and others to denote an unhealthy interest in the work of the Holy Spirit or an unwelcome shift from piety to pietism.

<sup>10</sup> Gordon Watt, “Prayer And Revival,” article in *Herald of His Coming* newsletter, Internet Edition, May 2006. Retrieved from *Herald of His Coming* web site: <http://www.heraldofhiscoming.com/other/home.htm>.



In Confessional Lutheran ears, the word “revival” might mean that God’s people are connecting with the Word of God through church attendance, Bible reading, and Holy Communion on a more frequent basis. Confessional Lutherans might sense “revival” to mean that more young people are pouring into the churches, or men are functioning as genuine spiritual leaders in the homes, or there are many adult converts coming through Bible information classes. Revival in the WELS might be that God’s people open their hearts to support God’s work financially—far above the WELS statistical norm. Revival might mean that people’s lives are completely changed to a life of piety without buying into pietism.<sup>11</sup>

To southern Baptist or evangelical Christian ears, “revival” might mean that many more people than usual came forward during the altar call, or the stadium would be filled to overflowing during the crusade. To charismatic (Pentecostal) ears, “revival” might be heard as a specific outpouring or manifestation of God the Holy Spirit. In brief, one practical definition of revival is that “God showed up!” Some measure God’s arrival by a manifestation of the Spirit, some by the conversion of sinners during an altar call, some through significantly increased connection with Word and Sacrament. Clearly, however, the term “revival” does not mean the same thing to all Christians—or even all WELS Christians.

What might a revival in a local WELS church look like? A WELS congregation of 300 souls has leveled off at 125 in weekend worship attendance, 20 in adult Bible study, and 2 adult converts per year. Apathy for the things of God has set in. It is a “good WELS church,” but it has not expanded or adjusted its ministry activities since the neighborhood changed over twenty years ago. A revival in this church might mean that

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<sup>11</sup> John M. Brenner, “Piety and Pietism” series, *Forward in Christ* 92 (January 2005–April 2005).

through the preaching and teaching of the Word and use of the Sacraments, God, the Holy Spirit, would sweep through the hearts and minds of the people, convicting them of sinful apathy. The Holy Spirit would convince many people to more completely appreciate God's great mercy through the cross of Christ and would produce in them a fresh passion and ability to live like Jesus himself.

This fresh and Spirit-driven appreciation of the gospel would send the people out in power to model Christ's love in the community and share Christ's saving gospel with renewed strength, clarity, and urgency. The sowing of the gospel message in additional numbers of hearts would produce more conversions by God's blessing. The converted would bring new experiences, connections to the community, and joy to the congregation. The congregational pattern of apathy would be broken. A new pattern of expecting to see the gospel message convert hearts and dramatically change lives would replace it. Would that not qualify as a revival?

A revival in the WELS might be relatively simple in appearance, like Boston in 1842. The preaching of the Word would produce a revival in the desire of the people to attend worship services each week. Perhaps a significant number of spiritually weak, pleasure-driven, unmotivated, easily distracted, apathetic, culture-swallowing, materialistic, straying Christian believers would become more seriously committed to the things of their God, rather than things of self.

Regardless of the words used to describe God's work of revival, genuine Christians agree that revival, renewal, and awakening are God's work, not the work of God's people. As sin-ruined human beings, all people are completely unable to convert themselves to Christ, or once converted, move forward in terms of renewal, revival, or

reform. When we are born into this world, we need God to convert us to Christ. When our converted hearts become indifferent, lazy, half-hearted, or lukewarm to the things of God, we cannot refresh, invigorate, revive, renew, reform, or awaken ourselves. We need God to work change in us through the Word and Sacraments. We need to be crushed by God's law and rebuilt by God's gospel.

Although words and theological terms are important, it is not useful to wrangle long hours over language which seeks to describe these spiritual changes in the human heart. Rather, we need to utilize our time and energy to work on the twenty points of the Spiritual Renewal Project. We need the positive side of the twenty points to be written—not on tablets of paper, but on the tablets of many human hearts. Some may call such a change a “revival,” others “spiritual growth.” In the long haul, terms will not matter much as long as “revival” happens.

### **It Is Important to Recognize the Need for Revival**

Denial in the WELS is no longer an option. By God's grace, there are a growing number of clergy and laity who recognize the need for spiritual renewal in the WELS. Synod leaders are speaking more openly and often about the financial struggles and the reasons for them. People are reading information posted on the WELS web site, the Church and Change web site, or the Issues In WELS web site.<sup>12</sup> Even WELS bloggers have come forward to be heard.<sup>13</sup> The volume of the voices saying, “WELS needs revival,” is being turned up.

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<sup>12</sup> WELS: [www.wels.net](http://www.wels.net); Church and Change: [www.churchandchange.org](http://www.churchandchange.org); Issues In WELS: [www.issuesinwels.com](http://www.issuesinwels.com).

<sup>13</sup> WELS in Crisis blog, <http://welsincrisis.blogspot.com>.

However, there are those, the uninvolved masses, who see no clear and present danger. For them all is well. The usual array of WELS products and services is available for them and their children. Their names are on a WELS congregational roster. Christmas, Easter, baptism, Sunday School, confirmation classes, weddings, weekend worship services, free counseling services with the pastor, emergency hospital or crisis visits, and a church funeral are available if desired or needed. What's all this talk about the WELS needing revival? For many, the only crisis in the church is its lack of money (whether that lack is perceived or real).

If local church or synod-wide financial trouble is brought to the member's attention through the bulletin announcements, many cling to the doctrine that the church militant will always face struggles and challenges. They conclude that these times are no different than any other time. The local church and synod have always made it through somehow. Why sound the alarm in 2006? Why get excited at this exact time in history? Do not people understand that the alarm has always been going off since the Apostle John addressed the seven churches in the book of Revelation?

Some pastors and leaders self-medicate with the idea that as the end times draw closer, Confessional Lutheran synods like the WELS will indeed shrink rather than grow. They argue that shrinking in numbers is a mark of orthodoxy. People of this dark age will turn away from the simple law and gospel preaching, not be drawn to it (2 Timothy 3). Why be surprised at what is happening? Why fight the inevitable?

Others use logic to explain why they do not work toward revival. If Christians can not usher in or manipulate revival through prayer and repentance, what is the point of making an effort toward revival? Jesus will soon return and shut down this wicked

world. That is the revival we seek, desperately need, and silently pray for as we recite the Apostle's Creed. Our job as faithful WELS Christians is to hold on to the pure truth of God's Word for dear life until the end. If there is a revival in Christendom before the return of Christ, fine. However, that would be an unexpected bonus from the merciful hand of God.

As a result of such thinking (and teaching), many people in the WELS do not seek revival. They see no need for a revival, or no way to crank one up. Some may even consider that a concerted effort at revival in the WELS would bring more harm to faith than good. Seeking revival smacks of church growth or reformed theology or charismatic emotionalism. In many WELS minds, striving for revival—although it could theoretically be done correctly—would surely be misunderstood by many if attempted. A revival effort would almost certainly lead WELS down the slippery slope of pietism over time. Remember the sad lesson of history. “Jacob Spener had good intentions, but bad results.”<sup>14</sup>

In spite of statistics, sad stories, a crumbling American Christian culture, and emotional pain in the lives of many in the WELS, overall denial of the need for a revival in the WELS remains. It is as if the WELS has been down by the sea faithfully building sandcastles for many years. It hears the news report that a tsunami is coming but does not think the report is real. After all, there has never been a tsunami in their lifetime or in their location. Therefore, they do not move to high ground.

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<sup>14</sup> David Wenzel, “Fundamentalism & Evangelicalism: A Survey of their Histories and Teachings in Light of Scripture,” presentation given at a pastors’ conference in Green Bay, Wis., 12 April 2005. In reference to Philip Jacob Spener, *Pia Desideria*, translated, edited, and with an introduction by Theodore G. Tappert (N.p.: Fortress Press, 1964).

A few, however, believe the tsunami reports are real. Unfortunately, they cannot get those who do not believe to really look at what is coming their way. Both sides feel as if they are trapped in a disaster movie from the 1970s. As a result, both those who believe a tsunami is coming and those who do not believe it are frozen in their tracks. Every day that goes by brings the tsunami closer and robs everybody of one more day in which to take appropriate action. Not seeing the need for revival in a Christian church or church body is a real problem.

### **It Is Important to Prepare for Revival**

As Confessional Lutheran Christians know, teach, and believe, faithfully preparing for a revival does not magically produce a revival. The Holy Spirit blows where he wishes. He is under no obligation to show up at the beck and call of sinners like us. In terms of granting a revival, God is by no means tied to our WELS location (North America) or the timetable we hold to passionately (our lifetime).

If, for example, 100 WELS congregations made a concerted effort to pray for revival, get into the Word, and seriously repent of their sins, what would God do? History demonstrates that God may produce spiritual renewal in all 100 churches plus another 100, or 3, or none. He may produce revival in 210 churches—blessing those who did not even seek revival. God may choose to bless the revival effort in six months, six years or 66 years. The timing, location, breadth, and depth of revival are always up to God.

It may, therefore, seem nonsensical to work toward preparing for a revival, but consider revival from God's perspective. God knows what he will do. He knows the "who" and "when" and "where" of revival. We do not. God only tells us in his Word to

aim for revival. It is not unlike his command to “go and make disciples.” As we aim to accomplish that task for God and through God, we receive great blessings. All of God’s commands, although tiring and unpleasant to accomplish at times, are good for us. The sinful nature in us rebels, but the new man in us wants to obey our Father’s commands and can obey them. Jesus tells us that if we obey his commands, we are blessed (Luke 11:28).

Preparation steps toward revival can be listed or discussed in any number of ways.

We will focus on the following revival preparation steps:

1. A faithful presenting of the need for revival in the WELS.
2. A faithful use of the Word and Sacraments for revival in the WELS.
3. A faithful call to repentance in the WELS.
4. A faithful use of prayer in the WELS.

The first five chapters of this thesis address the first step—the need for revival. The second step is obvious in the WELS. (Genuine revival flows through the Word and Sacraments of baptism and Holy Communion.) The third step, repentance, is mentioned throughout the second half of the thesis, but dealt with especially in Chapter Ten. The fourth step, prayer, is dealt with especially in Chapter Nine.

God draws us a road map so we can head toward revival. He expects us to follow it in unquestioning obedience. He says, “If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land” (2 Chronicles 7:14). The prophet Joel was sent to tell the people much the same thing after God had devastated the land with a plague of locusts and a drought:

Put on sackcloth, O priests, and mourn; wail, you who minister before the altar. Come, spend the night in sackcloth, you who minister before God... Declare a holy fast; call a sacred assembly... “Even now,” declares the LORD, “return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning.” Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity. Who knows but that he may turn and have pity and leave behind a blessing... Blow the trumpet in Zion, declare a holy fast, call a sacred assembly... Let the priests, who minister before the LORD... say, “Spare your people, O LORD.” Then the LORD will be jealous for his land and take pity on his people (Joel 1:13, 14 and 2:12, 13, 17, 18).

These steps to revival are surely not for God’s benefit. There is no magic to them, nor an exact order or length (like the steps of the grieving process). God lays them out for our benefit. Almost always, in both the Old Testament prophets and Jesus’ call to the churches of Revelation 2 and 3, the steps boil down to remembering that God has claimed us as his holy people. Therefore, pray! Get into the Word—and obey it! And repent! These are but bread crumbs which lead us back home where we belong.

In terms of revival preparation steps, some use the illustration of a ship at sea. The wind is coming. No one knows exactly when or from which direction. The question is, when the wind arrives, are the sails trimmed to catch it? Are sailors faithfully at their posts or drunk? Is the captain of the ship near the helm or on leave? Is the ship’s cargo properly stowed so that when the ship begins to move, gain speed, or change direction, the ship will not list? Getting prepared does not make anything happen. It means that when something happens, one is prepared.

And finally, because WELS Lutheran Christians seek revival, openly discuss revival, and take specific steps to prepare for revival, does not mean that they have become Reformed Christians or have bought into wrong “church growth” thinking. Preparing for revival, seeking revival, and encouraging revival is no sin. In fact, such effort—if done



according to Scripture—pleases God and is part of the revival itself. Whether or not God uses it for revival of the WELS, there is nothing wrong with ratcheting up the effort to pray, obey the Word, and repent. In fact, there is everything right with it. It is right to do what God calls us to do, no matter what does or does not happen next. “People are often unreasonable, illogical, and self-centered; Forgive them anyway. If you are honest and frank, people may cheat you; Be honest anyway. What you spend years building, someone could destroy overnight; Build anyway. You see, in the final analysis, it is between you and your God; It was not between you and them anyway.”<sup>15</sup>

### **It Is Important to Cooperate with God in Revival**

By including his children in the revival effort, however weak and ordinary they may be, God is stretching and exercising their faith muscles through participation. Of course, God the Father is able to do things all by himself even without our asking (John 5:5). He often does. But much of the time he invites his wayward children to put their little bit of ingredients in the revival soup.

God’s children do not have to worry if they have put in enough ingredients, or even their best. Their perfect Father will make “stone soup” of whatever imperfect ingredients come from his hungry children. Most importantly he wants their hearts to be in the process. Has the proper use of law and gospel moved his children to recognize their need for revival, see in him their only hope for revival, and urged them to faithfully practice the steps toward revival which he has given them in his Word? If so, he will gladly use whatever effort or ingredients they bring.

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<sup>15</sup> “Mother Teresa: ‘Do It Anyway’,” poem by Mother Teresa, retrieved from The Prayer Foundation web site: [http://prayerfoundation.org/mother\\_teresa\\_do\\_it\\_anyway.htm](http://prayerfoundation.org/mother_teresa_do_it_anyway.htm).

Some worry that if one speaks of cooperating with God in terms of a revival, the credit would not go back to God, or people would get the wrong idea—that a revival is all about them. Our Heavenly Father is not worried about his children helping him. His Holy Spirit will prevent them from thinking they have produced revival of their own efforts. God, the Holy Spirit, will carefully teach his people where the credit for revival truly belongs (Philippians 2:13). This is especially true for those whom God chooses and uses to lead the revival. Revival leaders will be careful not to claim credit because the Father has dutifully and sometimes painfully stripped them of self for their own good. Thus, passionately cooperating with God in practicing steps toward revival, taking credit for themselves as leaders in the revival is no longer a burning temptation to them. God has dutifully cleansed them from such thinking, at least as much as possible or necessary for their own good. God does not want them to be stung by vain-glory or pride. Billy Graham is a good example of this God-worked humility.<sup>16</sup>

In love, the Father teaches his children the great lesson of humility before he brings revival. They can do nothing by themselves. He does everything. This is a preparation step he does. “Their deeds do not permit them to return to their God. A spirit of prostitution is in their heart...they do not acknowledge the LORD. I am like a lion to Judah. I will tear them to pieces and go away...I will go away until they admit their guilt. And they seek my face; in their misery they will earnestly seek me...Return, O Israel, to the LORD your God. Your sins have been your downfall! Take words with you and return to the LORD. Say to him: ‘Forgive all our sins and receive us graciously, that we may offer the fruit of our lips’” (Hosea 5:4, 14, 15 and 14:1, 2).

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<sup>16</sup> Billy Graham, *Just As I Am: The Autobiography of Billy Graham* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1997; HarperPaperbacks, 1998).

When God is done with a revival cycle, all is done well, because he has done it all. No one is stung by pride. No one has robbed him of his glory. God smiles on those who worked toward revival—and he blesses them. Those who worked toward revival smile on God—and they thank him. In true revival there is mutual work, blessing, and benefit. This is how God designed the system. He is working with his converted (i.e., weak) children.

How much of revival, renewal, and reform is human effort, and how much is of God? Let the author state (again) that as a Confessional Lutheran Christian, conversion to faith in Christ and sanctification is entirely God's work. The Bible clearly states this (Ephesians 2:8-10, Acts 5:31, et al.). WELS Christians have enjoyed the blessing of this biblical understanding through the efforts of a long list of faithful seminary professors such as John Brug.<sup>17</sup>

Unconverted sinners are spiritual enemies of God and completely blind and dead to the things of God. They cannot by biblical definition assist in any way in their conversion to Christ. Christians, by contrast, are in God's family. There is at least a flicker of saving faith in their hearts. The new man within may be weak, but by definition is still present. As a result, Christians are not mind-numbed robots in the revival process.

God encourages, expects, and commands full cooperation from his children in terms of revival. God, in love, gives Christians the duty, privilege, and blessing of placing their imperfect hands in his holy hands to help him in the work of revival. WELS Christians are not the only ones to understand this important truth. Walter Kaiser summarizes this key issue with these words: "Scripture taught both positions, and one without the other

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<sup>17</sup> John F. Brug, "The Lutheran Doctrine of Sanctification and Its Rivals," 184.

was in danger of becoming lopsided. Thus I conclude that there can be no revival without the Lord's initiating it and carrying it out. But I also conclude that no one can hide behind the doctrine of God (strict Calvinism). There are essential factors for a revival, such as repentance, prayer, the preaching of the Word, [and] humbling ourselves under the mighty hand of God."<sup>18</sup>

Let the reader understand. God did not record the revivals of the Bible to spark theological debate. Revival stories describe the love and work of God for hurting, wandering people of God who already belong to him. God often begins revival by opening the eyes of some to see the danger the flock is in. God uses those he has awakened to the danger to take further action: Sound the alarm! Pray! Preach the Word! Repent! Things have not changed much from the time of the prophet Habakkuk. By the Spirit our hearts resonate with his as we listen to him proclaim God's Word. "A prayer of Habakkuk the prophet. LORD, I have heard of your fame; I stand in awe of your deeds, O LORD. Renew them in our day, in our time make them known; in wrath remember mercy...Yet I will wait patiently...Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior. The Sovereign LORD is my strength" (Habakkuk 3:1, 2, 16-19).

As Habakkuk did, Father, please give us passion to see revival in our day and place. Give us patience and courage as we wait and work for you to bring it. God's amazing love for sinners and the rescue operations which flow from such love fuel the fire of hope

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<sup>18</sup> Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Revive Us Again*, 17-18.

in us today. As God rescued people of Scripture, the European church of the Middle Ages, and the world through Jesus, will he not rescue us today?

Whether through the WELS, through other of his believing people, or use of unbelievers like Herod, Judas, and Pilate, God's rescue operation will be carried out. Whether we cooperate with God or not, or move in his strength (like Jonathan) or weakness (like Jonah), his purposes will prevail. May we in the WELS do all that we can to fully, faithfully, and joyfully cooperate with our God in his rescue operations among us.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### BUILDING BLOCKS FOR REVIVAL IN THE WELS

I am concerned for you and will look on you with favor...I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.

Ezekiel 36:9, 26 NIV

WELS leaders of today have noted the need for change.<sup>1</sup> Whether they have studied revival movements or not, they know the Scriptures. The solutions to spiritual problems are not difficult to uncover. As a result, WELS leaders are attempting to get people into the Word. They are encouraging people to repent of their sins (greed, apathy, etc.). They are praying fervently to God for help. These WELS leaders of today, whether they be pastors, teachers, seminary professors, synod administrators, or church members, need to be encouraged, supported, and appreciated. In their own way and setting, they are doing what they can to make necessary changes.

These men and women are building blocks which God can use and is using to lead the WELS into a bright future of serving the Savior. In addition, God has provided other important building blocks, each of which can be used by him to create a genuine revival in the WELS. In this chapter we will consider several strengths of the WELS which have emerged since the WELS became an independent synod in 1961.

#### **Revival Efforts of WELS Pioneers from 1961 to 1981**

“WELS Pioneers” from 1961 to 1981 have provided a building block for revival in today’s WELS. Early WELS pioneers did not seek change for the sake of change. They instinctively knew that they needed to do something to help God’s people in the WELS

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<sup>1</sup> James F. Korthals, “How the Reformers Dealt with Change in the Church.”

reach out with the Word. So they did. Some focused on evangelism for the sake of survival, others because God, the Holy Spirit, had put outreach on their heart. For some it was difficult to tell the difference, but through it all God was working.

One place where leaks in the WELS ship began to appear early was in inner-city Milwaukee. “White flight” was in full swing by 1975. Previously strong “cornerstone” congregations such as St. John’s, St. Marcus, Atonement, and Siloah were in turmoil.<sup>2</sup> Informal pioneer leaders emerged to hack a trail into a new way of doing ministry. Names like Schaeffer, Westendorf, and Koelpin became people to seek out if you were looking for WELS models on how to keep up with a rapidly changing American culture, especially in the inner cities. White flight was well under way, and it could not be ignored.

Mirroring “white flight” was the “youth flight” in the churches. Several pastors worked to find ways to help congregations adjust to new realities of the free sex era, the drug culture, and the influence of the rock music culture. From these efforts in the mid-seventies, “youth ministry” eventually emerged. Although it was not called that back then, both white flight and troubles with our youth gave a few pastors and congregations an early opportunity to do cross-cultural ministry. Could the WELS keep its youth in the fold, welcome African-American culture, and retain pure doctrine?

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<sup>2</sup> St. John’s on 4<sup>th</sup> street, served by synod President John Brenner, once was the largest WELS congregation, but is almost gone. (A recent regular Sunday worship service had nine people in attendance). St. Marcus was a well-established downtown congregation which almost collapsed in the late 70s. Atonement was an all-white congregation in a predominantly Jewish neighborhood which has absorbed the turnover to inner-city and has become a biracial congregation. Siloah was the largest congregation in the WELS at one time and struggled for a time.

Other pastors were attending “Abdon Seminars,”<sup>3</sup> rethinking the how and why of church structure and congregational polity. Still others were finding ways to conduct adult Bible studies, which were not unheard of in those days but rare. Still others were developing stewardship programs, helping people focus on the concepts of God-pleasing financial giving, or considering God-pleasing ways to transfer wealth from one generation to the next in the church body. Several pastors were working out models to reach the straying members of the congregation, another emerging problem. Through every effort, important learning and adjusting to “ministry as usual” was taking place.

In Michigan, early WELS pioneers felt compelled to reach out aggressively with the good news. Through the gospel, God created what was called “the Michigan spirit.” This was a spirit of aggressive outreach. The Michigan spirit was embodied in men like Norm Berg, Art Walker, Dan Gieschen, Ray Wichman, and Win Valesky (who published and distributed his own evangelism materials). In those days, the Michigan spirit was supported by district president Jerry Press. The Michigan district was eager to call men who would do whatever necessary to establish new WELS congregations. From the men in this district came the rallying cry (though not a rule), “Every state by ’78.” In the early years that spirit of outreach was not common throughout the WELS districts, although the California district was a notable exception.

The aggressive outreach spirit was so pervasive in Michigan in the 60s and 70s that one pastor in the Dakota-Montana district warned his brother WELS pastor, “Don’t take a call into that liberal (Michigan) district.” Leaders of the Michigan spirit often received

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<sup>3</sup> Don Abdon was a former Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod pastor who conducted hundreds of church polity seminars in the early 1970s and 80s.



mail from concerned brothers from other districts accusing them of doing something underhanded, although, of course, that was not the case.

Pastors in the Michigan district held their own “free conferences” with Missouri Synod brothers to see if they could work things out. Leaders in the Michigan district broke “synod rules” by advancing mission work beyond the written rule of “one state at a time.” The Michigan district served where they were invited to serve, even establishing WELS churches in Virginia and Florida with their own manpower and money. As early as 1980, pastors in the Michigan district were inviting non-WELS financial fund-raising companies to teach them how to enhance biblical giving for the sake of reaching out with the gospel.

In addition, leaders in the Michigan district fought hard to support the young synod’s efforts to establish home and world missions. They worked with Edgar Hoenecke to reverse the unfortunate thinking of J. P. Koehler who unintentionally negatively influenced a generation of WELS pastors. (Koehler did not get behind the idea of world mission work.) In those days, if a WELS pastor from the Michigan district did not grow his congregation’s financial support for home and world missions from year to year, he would be visited by district leaders, who would invite him out for a beer to explain things to him. Accountability to the Michigan spirit of outreach was not a concept; it was a reality. These early WELS pioneers pushed the WELS toward the cutting edge of outreach work as we understand it in our modern, global society.

One special person who embodied the Michigan spirit of outreach in those days was Ernst Wendland.<sup>4</sup> He accepted a call to move from Benton Harbor, Michigan, to help

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<sup>4</sup> Ernst Wendland served as a missionary in Africa, establishing a seminary there, and later served as a professor at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, pushing hard toward mission work. The story of WELS world

establish the fledgling WELS African mission field. On the world mission field, it was understood that business as usual as done in the United States was not the way to go. Under Wendland's leadership, new forms of worship and the role of men and women were continually reviewed. In Michigan and Africa in the 1960s and 70s, all doctrines such as the role of men and women and church fellowship were important—they were certainly not ignored, but the doctrine of love for lost souls paved the way forward in ministry. There were other pastors in the synod who had the Michigan spirit in those days, but in Michigan the spirit of outreach was strong, widespread, and visible.

The success God gave to the work of these early WELS pioneers was extremely important. Their efforts, at bare minimum, established a mindset in younger (baby boomer) pioneers who watched them, learned from them, and followed in their footsteps. The early pioneers taught a simple, valuable lesson in the flesh: if you want God to bring spiritual blessings to people through your life and ministry, go for it. It will be hard work. Perhaps you may have to stretch a few man-made rules, or perhaps someone in the WELS will criticize you, but God will bless the effort.

### **Revival Efforts of WELS Pioneers from 1981 to Present**

WELS Pioneers from 1981 to the present have provided a building block for revival in today's WELS. In spite of God's blessings on the early WELS pioneers and their faithful effort, the WELS was getting further and further behind in making disciples of more and more people. As previously noted, the downward trend in the WELS became visible to the naked eye about 1990. Several years before 1990, a few WELS leaders had

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missions is told in this book: Theodore A. Sauer, project director, *To Every Nation, Tribe, Language, and People: A Century of WELS World Missions*, edited by Harold R. Johne and Ernst H. Wendland (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1992).

already spotted leaks and noticed that the WELS was taking on water. She was still growing numerically and adding ministry (especially in home and world missions), and synod schools were expanding, but “keeping up” was becoming increasingly difficult.

Some of the early pioneers, who helped establish the synod after the 1961 split, could see that American culture was backsliding, becoming more secular and less supportive of Christ than ever. Change was becoming more rapid, not less. By the early 1980s there was a growing realization that things might not bounce back on their own. This was a new day—and not a sunny one. Members could see this. Pastors and church councils could feel it in their bones, but was it too late to do anything about it?

About 1981, in Milwaukee, a small group of men began to gather regularly to see what, if anything, could be done to stave off disaster. This second generation of WELS pioneers included Bob Zank (pastor at St. Paul’s, Muskego), Ron Heins (pastor at St. John’s, Wauwatosa), Ron Roth (pastor at St. Lucas, Milwaukee), and Paul Kelm (a pastor and a member of the Wisconsin Lutheran College faculty). As the Michigan Spirit was promoted by Dan Gieschen, Norm Berg, Art Walker, Ray Wichman, et al. in Michigan in the 60s and 70s, so this group of men would promote needed changes in the WELS throughout the 80s and 90s, mostly in Wisconsin.

At this point in history, some of God’s handiwork has been revealed. The first generation of WELS pioneers had direct influence on the second generation of pioneers. Ron Heins grew up in Lansing, Michigan, under the influence of the Michigan spirit. Dan Gieschen, who began his ministry in 1952, ordained and installed Paul Kelm when he entered the ministry in 1970 (serving a mission congregation on the east coast).

Because the WELS is close-knit, the pioneers from one generation kept in touch with those from the next.

It was this second group of WELS pioneers who proposed to the synod (in convention in 1983) that “spiritual renewal” become a focus in the WELS—a specific, synod-wide effort to stem the tide. It was this group that promoted the idea of another branch of synod which would support growing or floundering congregations with WELS-produced materials, workshops, and other helps. One result was the synod division known today as Parish Services, which is under the direction of Pastor Bruce Becker. From Parish Assistance, any number of aids have been made available to individual pastors and congregations.

Paul Kelm helped establish spiritual renewal as a focal point in congregations. Ron Heins and Kelm worked together to establish the consulting branch of the WELS known as Parish Assistance. Ron Roth picked up the work of Jeb Schaefer and synod president Carl Mischke, modernizing the “special gifting” division of the synod which actually surpassed the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America in its ability to transfer wealth from this generation of WELS members to future generations. Through Bruce Becker, the synod began to network large congregations throughout the WELS and assisted in establishing the organization called Church and Change.

Interwoven with these men and their efforts were the efforts of Mark Braun and John Bauer, who established the WELS think tank known as the CHARIS Institute at Wisconsin Lutheran College in Milwaukee. There were other pioneers who helped bring in contemporary worship forms (a new hymnal) and other styles of worship. There were pioneers like John Barber and Steve Boetcher who worked with mass media. In more

recent years, there have been many laymen and women who have helped the synod keep up in a wide variety of ways. The pioneers have been raising up other pioneers.

Obviously, not all efforts to make adjustments to a rapidly changing culture can be known or mentioned by this author in this brief writing. In recent years several additional WELS pioneers have emerged. Not all of their efforts have been successful in the eyes of men. In fact, many individuals and congregations have failed to achieve stated goals, but God in grace has helped them “fail forward.”

Regardless of visible outcomes, God knows and appreciates innovative efforts offered in the name of Christ to advance the cause of Christ. WELS Christians of today cannot comprehend how much worse off our beloved synod might be today if it were not for both the informal and formal efforts of WELS pioneers who have gone before us. We thank God for our WELS pioneers.

### **Revival Efforts of the WELS “Steady Eddies”**

The WELS “Steady Eddies” of the past have provided a building block for revival in today’s WELS. God’s assignment for the “Steady Eddies” was not to think about or get involved in cutting-edge ministry. Rather, God’s assignment for the “Steady Eddies” was to keep things on-line at the WELS shop. The “Steady Eddies” were the pastors, teachers, synod leaders, members, and administrators who kept the long established good things of the WELS going—day after day and year after year. Often, pioneers are not much suited to perform the ongoing long term functions of a “Steady Eddie” any more than “Steady Eddies” are suited to do the work of a pioneer.

In love, God blessed the WELS with both pioneers and “Steady Eddies.” Both were vital ingredients in keeping the WELS moving forward to where it is today—poised for

revival. They may have wondered what was wrong with each other at times. Much like a husband and wife in marriage, the work of the pioneers and the work of the “Steady Eddies” complimented one another beautifully. Neither was more important to the WELS than the other—but they viewed life differently!

For the “Steady Eddies,” ministry was not about keeping up with the culture shift; it was about doing the work of basic ministry and letting God deal with the changing culture if need be. They were not for aggressive changes in the church, but they were not especially against changes either. The pioneers carried a vision of big changes that would help the church keep up with a changing culture. The “Steady Eddies” usually did not carry a list of potential changes in their minds. Unfortunately, the “Steady Eddie” pastors had no choice. Try as they might, they could not avoid or put off all change forever. So, reluctantly and often under compulsion, they learned about change and did the best they could to manage it—especially if they had a pioneer who was out in front.

Even if church leader pioneers were not around, the expectations of the people and church councils were changing. In modern ministry, people expected weekly announcements, audio-taped sermons, use of video-tapes in Bible classes, radio broadcasts, technology upgrades (e-mail, fax machines, answering machines, cell phones, PowerPoint, computers, sound systems, etc.). These things—and more—had become accepted adjustments to culture in the church. The “Steady Eddie” pastors, teachers, and members in their 40s and 50s were too young to ignore these changes, but in many cases were too old to truly embrace them. They were dealing with things (changes) on a daily basis which were not explained to them during their seminary or college days. There were no easy answers—and no Confessional Lutheran templates to follow. The pioneers

were energized by the challenges presented by change. The “Steady Eddies” were stressed out by them.

By God’s grace, WELS did all right in its early years with rapid cultural change. There were some pioneers who made some changes, and many of the churches in the rural Midwest did not face much change for a few years ( about 1961 to 1980). Although American culture crumbled all around, faithful preaching of the law and gospel never stopped in the WELS. In the trenches, WELS German Christian soldiers kept up a steady barrage of fire-power on the devil, the world, and the sinful flesh with the Word and Sacraments. Throughout its congregations in North America, the message rang out Sunday after Sunday, confirmation class after confirmation class, and Sunday school class after Sunday school class: “You cannot save yourself—but Jesus has saved you! Believe in him! Serve him!” The simple themes of the Bible were faithfully proclaimed in a straightforward and almost completely unified way.

Everybody used the same hymnal with the same liturgy. Memorization of Scripture and hymn verses continued day and night. True to his promise, wherever the Word and Sacraments went, God the Holy Spirit worked in sinful human hearts. The Spirit silently and faithfully performed the miracle of giving faith in Christ. The Holy Spirit provided a measure of growth in Christ. God blessed the efforts of the “Steady Eddies” in the local WELS churches and schools.

There were also “Steady Eddies” in synod leadership. These faithful men continued the formal training of young men and women for the public ministry. Northwestern College in Watertown, Wisconsin, relentlessly cranked out (with German precision) faithful and doctrinally well-trained workers for the church body, as did Doctor Martin

Luther College.<sup>5</sup> Discussions about potential changes in American culture and what the WELS might do to adjust were mostly theoretical in the early years. Yet, there were leaders, pastors, and professors who could see the weather vane moving. These men attempted to make adjustments to culture as best they could in their synod leadership positions. The vicar year was added,<sup>6</sup> and practical theology courses were upgraded. WELS leaders scrambled to provide “early field experience” for those attending synod training schools.

In addition, several “Steady Eddies” of the synod produced conference papers, wrote articles for synod publications, and did whatever possible to advance the cause of home and world mission work through the synod’s established channels. These “Steady Eddies” watched over Northwestern Publishing House and the regular business of the synod, districts and circuits—with diligence. Because of the “Steady Eddies” of the past, WELS has retained all that is good and God-pleasing about our past. Thank God for WELS “Steady Eddies”!

Through the specific efforts of the pioneers and “Steady Eddies,” today’s WELS is much better off. Today’s WELS is learning from their failures. Today’s WELS is building on their successes. No doubt, God blessed the efforts of both the pioneers and “Steady Eddies” through the years. Neither, however, could or would claim that they got things exactly right all the time. As a result, the WELS of today has inherited not only the strengths, but also the weaknesses of the pioneers and “Steady Eddies” who have gone before.

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<sup>5</sup> Northwestern College served as the “pastor track” college for many years in the WELS. Doctor Martin Luther College served as the “teacher track” college for many years.

<sup>6</sup> A one-year internship became mandatory about 1970. The vicarship program was designed to add practical experience to the extensive intellectual education of pastoral candidates.



### **The Ability of the WELS to Identify Its Strengths and Weaknesses**

An obvious building block toward revival, then, would be to make a sincere attempt to minimize weaknesses and maximize the strengths of the synod. Neither is possible unless strengths and weaknesses are honestly and accurately assessed. The good news is that the WELS has been gaining ground in its ability to carefully analyze its strengths and weaknesses as a synod.

Those connected with WELS Parish Assistance, under the leadership of Pastor Ron Heins, have been preaching this sermon about self-analysis to individual congregations since 1992. Several hundred congregations have participated in the Parish Assistance program. Each congregation spends months completing assessment tools before WELS consultants arrive on site.

In July of 2006, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary invited a cross-section of the WELS (about sixty people) to analyze the type of pastor coming out of the seminary. What adjustments, if any, should the seminary make in its training of WELS pastors? Participants came away believing that this was a serious evaluation which would lead to real adjustments in the pastoral training regimen.

Parish Assistance, under Pastor Ron Heins; the Spiritual Growth Project, under Pastor Warren Widmann; and the recent seminary evaluation, under Pastor Paul Wendland, point to a building block which has not been easy to put in place, but it is in place. The WELS is becoming more used to the idea and more open to the concept of honest evaluation—and this in a German, male-oriented, midwestern synod. Taking a good hard look at one's decisions, attitudes, and failures is painful. Many pastors,

churches, and church bodies do not have the courage to do it. It is true that fixing problems is even more of a challenge than identifying them, but at least the WELS is beginning to seriously look at who it is and where it is.

The solution to any problem we face is clear. The solution is not to try harder in the future. Rather, the solution is to beat a path to the cross of Jesus in true repentance. God, we are sorry for our many failures. We cling to what Jesus has done for us. Lord, have mercy on us. Through the process of honest evaluation, God is preparing the WELS for revival.

### **The Blessing of the Gospel**

Without question, the primary blessing in the WELS is the gospel in Word and Sacraments. The gospel of Jesus is not complicated. The Greek word for gospel means “good news.” Jesus proclaimed the gospel to Nicodemus, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). In the words of John A. Braun, “The work of Christ is for all humanity and its blessings apply to all. All are justified; that’s an objective fact attested to throughout the Scriptures.”<sup>7</sup> In the words of Jesus from the cross, “It is finished.”

The question in the mind of a Lutheran Christian, therefore, is not, “Brother, are you saved?” but rather, “Brother, do you know that Jesus has saved you?” Confessional Lutheran Christians define “gospel” in terms of justification, as article four of the Augsburg Confession does based on Romans 3:21-26 and 4:5: “...human beings cannot be justified before God by their own powers, merits, or works. But they are justified as a gift on account of Christ through faith when they believe that they are received into grace

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<sup>7</sup> John A. Braun, “The Gospel Is the Power God Gives Us to Do His Work,” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 103 (Spring 2006): 86.

and that their sins are forgiven on account of Christ, who by his death made satisfaction for our sins.”<sup>8</sup>

Paul proclaimed the gospel under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, “Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he [God] has reconciled you by Christ’s physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation” (Colossians 1:21, 22). Paul told the Ephesian Christians the same thing, “As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins...like the rest were by nature objects of wrath. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved” (Ephesians 2:1-5). Even more simply stated he declared, “While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8).

In the WELS we teach that faith (a gift from God) is the hand which grasps the historic facts of the works of Christ. We hold to the Scriptures which say, “Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved” (Acts 16:31). The simple gospel message of our sin and God’s grace is our identity. The gospel is our motivation to love God above all things and our neighbors as ourselves. The gospel message is in the cultural air that WELS Christians breathe. Without the blessing of the gospel message, no other blessings matter.

By God’s grace, we in the WELS enjoy the blessing of the good news to a high degree. The gospel message brings other blessings, including the idea that a person can be one hundred percent certain of eternal life. Theologically, John Wesley struggled with

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<sup>8</sup> Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord*, 39, 41.

the concept of certainty. WELS theologians do not. In addition to certainty, the gospel brings other blessings. The presence of the gospel means that revival is always possible.

### **The Blessing of Unity**

WELS unity is based on the gospel. WELS pastors (and therefore the members) all agree on the gospel. The gospel is surrounded by and interwoven with all other doctrines. Therefore, WELS unity is rightly based on the gospel and on the Lutheran Confessions, which are a faithful rendering of biblical doctrines. Doctrinal truths support the gospel message. False doctrines attack it. If there is not full agreement on all Bible doctrine, the gospel will sink in theological quicksand sooner or later.

In the WELS, therefore, we diligently practice church fellowship.<sup>9</sup> Our unity is primarily based on a common understanding of Bible doctrine. If we are not diligent in guarding our doctrine and practice closely, wolves in sheep's clothing will introduce heresy. Heresy will eventually contaminate the core gospel message and ultimately destroy the flock. Church fellowship supports the WELS and helps it proclaim the message.

WELS pastors, teachers, staff ministers, and members need to continue to fight for purity of doctrine. It is not a waste of time, therefore, to review or write papers about basic or ancillary doctrines at pastoral conferences, teacher conferences, pastoral circuit meetings, study clubs, district conventions, synod conventions, and other gatherings. Do we in the WELS agree on doctrine in all points? The answer needs to be, "Yes!" While other church bodies are dividing over doctrinal issues, the WELS is basking in her

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<sup>9</sup> See Appendix Two for summary statement of WELS church fellowship teaching.

blessing of doctrinal unity. The 2005 Synod Convention witnessed another synod-wide gathering undisturbed by doctrinal conflict. This was a surprise to no one.

Without doctrinal unity it is virtually impossible to work together for the cause of Christ. As members transfer from church to church in the WELS, they do not concern themselves about doctrine. The Bible teaching will be the same as their WELS home church. Parents of the WELS rest assured that their children will receive the same instruction in the Word they received as they attend Sunday School or confirmation classes—no matter which of the 1,260 WELS congregations they choose. Home and world missionaries will faithfully represent the body who called, supported, and sent them out. Unity in doctrine is a wonderful blessing.

Doctrinal issues (disagreements) do emerge from time to time. Circuit pastors and synod leaders carefully work through the situation. Corrections are made where possible. At other times, those entrenched in persistent doctrinal error are removed from WELS fellowship. The battles for doctrinal purity fought by our spiritual forefathers is bearing fruit today. WELS is united in doctrine under the Lutheran Confessions. By God's grace, the Word is still the rock on which the Confessions and the WELS are built.

Still, there may be a perception of disunity in the WELS. When a brother pastor applies the principles of church fellowship in a new and different way, he may receive a phone call from another brother asking him to explain himself. Most often there is not an accusation of false doctrine, but a general concern that lack of unity in application is dangerous practice. The thought is that diversity in application will lead to confusion of the laity and moves the WELS one step closer to the slippery slope of impure doctrine.

For example, when a congregation chooses to advance with “Family Forums” instead of the traditional “Voters’ Meetings,” some eyebrows are raised. (Family Forums involve all members, men and women, equally, especially if the decisions being made are not binding or are not doctrinal in nature.) When a woman explains the pastor’s sermon with a children’s talk in view of the adults, concern is raised. When one pastor allows non-WELS soloists to sing prior to the wedding ceremony, and another pastor does not allow for such things in the church he serves, eyebrows become furrowed.

The list of such varying practices is growing in the WELS. It is making some nervous. Overall, however, by God’s grace, there is still no identifiable difference in doctrine in the WELS. The unity of the Synod, which is based on doctrine, is still intact. That unity is a wonderful blessing on which to build toward revival.

### **The Blessing of Intellectual Christianity**

Some Christians unthinkingly filter their understanding of God through personal feelings supposedly generated by God, the Holy Spirit. They might not know that Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, but they are certain they have been touched by the Spirit. Other Christians may not know much about the prophecies concerning the Messiah and their fulfillment in Jesus, but they have experienced specific healing, guidance, and help from God. That is all they know. In their hearts and minds, that is all they need to know. Their faith in God is based primarily on personal experience. These touches from God can be powerful filters which keep Christians from “growing in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 3:18). Instead of getting into the Bible, people are spending their time praying to experience the next special and specific touch of God by the Spirit or healing or guiding.

In contrast, WELS Christians do not offer a “help yourself or others feel good” Christianity. Ours is not an “experience the Holy Spirit” Christianity. Ours is not an “experience victory for self, God and country” Christianity. Ours is a “theology of the cross” Christianity, carefully rooted in biblical facts.

In the WELS, our greatest concern is not for what we feel about God, or experience with God, or live out in our personal relationship with God. Rather, the focus is what we know about God. Our faith is founded on historical Bible facts. Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again. That is all we need to know. We do not need to feel or experience anything to be saved. We simply trust the facts of Scripture.

In the WELS, experience and feelings in one’s relationship with God are rightly subservient to the Scriptures. Therefore, church attendance and corporate Bible study are played up. In these settings, generally the pastor or another carefully trained Christian intellect distributes the facts of the Bible on which faith takes its stand. If there are questions, he is to find the correct answers—and fend off potential misunderstanding or error. Should we relate to God through personal experience and feelings? No, because experiences and feelings come and go. They can let us down. Are we relating to God through his unchangeable Word and Sacraments? That is good. These instruments of God’s unfailing love never change or waver.

Consider the positive side of striving to hold on to an intellectual Christianity. Many Christians fear that their church body is open to false doctrine because its pastors and spiritual leaders are not well grounded in the basic truths of the Scripture.<sup>10</sup> Instead their spiritual leaders have “experienced God” or “felt the call of God on their life.”

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<sup>10</sup> James Emery White, *Serious Times: Making Your Life Matter in an Urgent Day* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 98.

Some have not known the Lord but for a year or two. The fear of being led by a man of God who knows relatively little about Christian history or the Bible is real among many Christian groups around the world.

By God's grace, it is not so in the WELS. Our pastors are well trained in basic doctrine and the biblical languages. Is there any doubt that graduates from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary are intellectually capable of defending or teaching Bible-based, Christian, Lutheran doctrine? Likewise, the teachers who graduate from Martin Luther College are well trained to teach Bible stories and basic doctrine to children. How many members of the WELS today memorized Bible verse after Bible verse as a child in a Lutheran elementary school classroom? How many WELS members learned to defend Bible doctrine as they attended an area WELS high school?<sup>11</sup>

The numbers of graduates from WELS high schools are significant especially when compared to the weak or nonexistent Christian education systems of other church bodies. The depth of Christian insight and stability that our educational institutions add to our church body are difficult for WELS members to fully appreciate. (Let us fully respect and honor the men and women in the WELS who spend their ministries in the noble calling of teaching at one of our WELS schools.) God's blessing on intellectual Christianity through our WELS Christian education system is evident to non-WELS Christians who do not have such institutions.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> For example, Fox Valley Lutheran High School in Appleton, Wisconsin has produced about six thousand graduates in fifty years. The positive influence of Fox Valley Lutheran graduates on local WELS congregations is clearly evident.

<sup>12</sup> Based on author's conversations with non-WELS Christians (especially Pentecostal or Charismatic Christians).



In addition to regular doctrinal instruction through our schools, adults who seek to join the WELS are required to take a Bible Information Class.<sup>13</sup> Although it is not extensive by comparison with the training of those who came through the Lutheran school system, adults converts must complete this instruction in basic Lutheran doctrine before joining one of our congregations. Classes are usually one-on-one or in small groups, providing ample opportunity to compare Christian and non-Christian religions.

Other Christian churches may see or experience large numbers of conversions, but let us take a closer look. What is the intellectual Christian basis for them and their families? In many non-WELS Christian congregations, one does not have to know the sixty-six books of the Bible, the Apostle's Creed, the ten commandments, the Lord's Prayer, the two natures of Christ, or even the true meaning of Christmas or Easter to "walk the aisle" or "give your life to Christ." It is assumed that local churches will provide training in Bible knowledge at a later date, but that does not always happen. As a result, many in America claim to be Christian and believe in Jesus, but the intellectual basis for their faith is suspect.<sup>14</sup> The unfortunate lack of Bible knowledge among many Roman Catholic Christians is well known. Many former Catholics in Wisconsin report receiving little or no training in the Bible even while attending a Catholic school for years.

In contrast, it is the stated goal of the well-coordinated Christian education system of the WELS<sup>15</sup> to provide layers of repeated biblical truth and memorization on the hearts and minds of WELS youth, at least through confirmation age (normally eighth grade).

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<sup>13</sup> These classes are designed by each parish pastor. Several uniform courses have been produced and distributed over the years. Usually the courses are ten to sixteen hours of instruction covering basic doctrine.

<sup>14</sup> James Emery White, *Serious Times*, 98.

<sup>15</sup> Coordination and similarity of education is highly valued in the WELS. It is provided by having all WELS educators attend the same college and having all schools use the same hymnal and curriculum.

Members of the WELS should celebrate this blessing of intellectual Christianity, but they should not celebrate in arrogance. Intellectual Christianity is a blessing from God which we do not deserve. Therefore, we ought to value Christian education and work harder than ever to maintain this blessing. God can use intellectual Christianity to his advantage in a revival.

### **The Blessing of Faithfulness**

What does it mean to be a faithful husband, wife, friend, neighbor, son, daughter, or church member? What does it mean to be a faithful full-time called worker in the WELS? *Webster's Dictionary* describes faithful as, "Loyal, Constant, Staunch, Steadfast, Resolute. This means firm in adherence to whatever one owes allegiance. Faithfulness implies unswerving adherence to a person or thing or to the oath or promise by which a tie was contracted. Steadfast implies a steady and unwavering course in love, allegiance, or conviction. Resolute implies firm determination to adhere to a cause or purpose."<sup>16</sup>

It follows, then, that being a faithful Catholic Christian means that you hold to Christ and his Church, led by the pope of Rome. Being a faithful Southern Baptist Christian means that you hold to Christ and teach that dedicating babies is a symbolic act (forgiveness of sins is not received). Being a faithful member of a "house church" means that you hold to Christ and agree to follow the group covenant. To function as a faithful Confessional Lutheran Christian means that you hold to Christ and teach the Scriptures as expounded in the Book of Concord.

By God's grace, in the WELS the Lutheran Confessions are studied, appreciated, and adhered to. The Confessions are often brought to bear when doctrine is being taught.

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<sup>16</sup> *Webster's Dictionary*, s.v. "faithful."

Part of the ordination vow of all pastoral candidates who graduate from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary includes taking an oath before God and his people to uphold the Confessions. Every seminary student is laboriously taught that their personal subscription to the Confessions is “because” (*quia*) they are a faithful rendering of Scripture. Pastors are not to subscribe “in so far as” (*quatenus*) they are a faithful rendering of Scripture. Strict adherence to the Lutheran Confessions marks WELS pastors, teachers, staff ministers, leaders, and WELS congregations as faithful. What they claim as doctrine on paper and what is actually being passed on to the next generation matches. Faithfulness to doctrine across an entire church body—what a tremendous blessing.

There are, however, additional ways to understand or benchmark faithfulness. The following definition of faithfulness is rooted not in the English language, but the Greek. “Originally the word-group denoted conduct that honored an agreement or bond. Faith [and by extension faithfulness] is used to express relationships between man and man, and also to express relationships with the divine. Faithfulness in the New Testament is the call made to man in the name of God which involves a renunciation of existing cult piety and rabbinical teaching.”<sup>17</sup>

In other words, faith and faithfulness are two sides of one coin. Each has no value without the other. In the New Testament the Apostle Paul often uses the term “faithfully.” The Scriptures are clear that “God is faithful” (1 Corinthians 10:13). God’s people, especially leaders, are to be reflections of the one they serve. They must be

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<sup>17</sup> Colin Brown, general ed., *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, Vol. I.: A-F, translated, with additions and revisions, from the German *Theologisches Begriffslexikon Zum Neuen Testament*, eds. Lothar Coenen, Erich Beyreuther, and Hans Bietenhard (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1975), 594-95, 599.

faithful. Of Timothy, Paul says, “I am sending you Timothy...who is faithful in the Lord. He will remind you of my way of life in Christ Jesus” (I Corinthians 4:17). Paul also states, “Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful” (1 Corinthians 4:1, 2). Former WELS seminary president Armin W. Schuetze and seminary professor Irwin J. Habeck summarized pastoral faithfulness with these words from their textbook on pastoral theology: “The faithfulness required of a pastor covers many areas. There is first of all faithfulness to the Lord, his Word, and his people. There is faithfulness in the stewardship of physical resources. There is faithfulness in the management of time. There is faithfulness in striving to do the best work of which he is capable. There is faithfulness in being alert for opportunities to serve. There is faithfulness in striving to maintain and to add to his store of knowledge by means of private and joint study.”<sup>18</sup>

In addition, faithfulness includes the idea that God’s people are to obey all the commands of the Bible, not only learn them (Matthew 28:19). Faithfulness implies believing and living the doctrines you have learned, not only repeating them accurately for relatives and church members to hear on Confirmation Day. Therefore, the true test of faithfulness includes both knowledge of doctrine and obedience to the truth.

Clearly, no sinful human being can be completely faithful to God or to any stated doctrines in a church body. When we are talking about faithfulness, we are discussing degrees of faithfulness. Is this person or church body faithful to a high degree or to a low degree? How might someone measure faithfulness, exactly? Is the measuring stick of faithfulness accurate doctrinal statements or full compliance to them? Obviously, in

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<sup>18</sup> Armin W. Schuetze and Irwin J. Habeck, *The Shepherd under Christ: A Textbook for Pastoral Theology* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1974), 19.

terms of faithfulness, both accuracy and compliance are vital in God's eyes. Whatever scale we in the WELS use to measure faithfulness, God will surely find us wanting.

The good news for all Christians is that God is faithful. God puts his faithfulness on display in the Bible. The black cloth of our unfaithfulness highlights the multifaceted diamond of God's faithfulness. "While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). We have a Savior who was completely faithful. What he believed matched exactly with what he did. What he did matched exactly with what he believed. He finished his assignments from the Father exactly (John 17). On judgment day may we lay claim by faith to the faithfulness of Jesus, not our own!

Faithfulness is not conjured up by human passion or effort. Faithfulness flows from the sweet message of forgiveness in Christ. "We love because he first loved us" (I John 4:19). We are faithful to God because he was first faithful to us. Paul writes to the Ephesians who are described as "the faithful in Christ Jesus" (Ephesians 1:1). Paul teaches the Galatians that "the fruit of the Spirit is...faithfulness" (Galatians 5:22). Consider Philippians 2:12, "For it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose." It is unthinkable that man is due any credit for faith or faithfulness in himself.

In this author's mind and heart (based on personal experience and observation of Christians both inside and outside the WELS), God has gifted the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod with a high degree of faithfulness. For the most part, what we say and do lines up with what we believe. Also, by God's grace, what we believe lines up with the Holy Scriptures (as best we can tell, our collective sinful natures notwithstanding). Unfortunately, as with any church culture or any individual, there are blind spots in

faithfulness where sight must be restored. There are hard-packed places, long forgotten, which must be tilled again and replanted.

### **Recognize That Strengths Can Become Weaknesses**

As far as this author can determine, the gospel message of the WELS has no deficiencies. It is the solid rock on which all other revival building blocks stand or are measured. This is not so with the strengths of WELS unity or WELS intellectual Christianity or WELS faithfulness. In these strengths there are inherent weaknesses. That is normal. It is to be expected. Part of honest evaluation is to identify, focus on, and build on strengths. The other part is to identify and minimize weaknesses wherever possible.

### The Weakness of WELS Unity

WELS unity in doctrine is a great blessing. There is, however, no longer unity in the WELS in application of doctrine or philosophy of ministry. This relatively new situation is the elephant in the room which WELS leaders and members do not want to talk about. We are a close-knit culture. We are intermarried with those who hold differing views. We went to school together and so do our children.

Professors and teachers are not well-practiced in discussing differences in application of doctrine and philosophy of ministry with their students. They did not face such things when they were training for the ministry. The pastor called the shots. Everybody followed his lead—some reluctantly, some joyfully, and most because it was the right thing to do. Did anyone discuss options with the pastor or the church council? That was

not normal. As a result, there are few opportunities to discuss our differences in the WELS in a well-managed, safe setting. However, things are beginning to change.

Seminary professor E. Allen Sorum delivered a paper on the subject of disunity to the Northern Wisconsin District on June 12, 2006. The following are quotes or characterizations of quotes from men of the Northern Wisconsin District taken from his paper.

- “We have nothing good to say about a ministry that is doing something different even if we haven’t visited that ministry or talked with the pastor.”
- “We have nothing good to say about a ministry that is doing everything the same even if we haven’t visited that ministry or talked with the pastor.”
- “If you do not adapt, you will die!”
- “If you adapt, you will die!”
- “We are afraid to start figuring out how to get the gospel out to the people around us.”
- “We are jumping ahead of our brothers [in WELS churches] and our members. We are targets; not leaders.”
- Pressure for change is coming from some successful evangelical mega-churches that are growing quickly. “Let us become like them!” [or] “Let us do nothing like them!”
- “Some fellas have become lightening [*sic*] rods.”
- “(Some fellas) are jealous.”
- “(Some fellas) are suspicious about everything.”
- “There are definite camps among us.”
- “We are working against each other sometimes.”
- “Why do we feel the need to reign [*sic*] in each other?”

- “People in the middle just want the people on the left and right to get together.”<sup>19</sup>

With these views, pastors, members, and WELS leaders are noting significant differences of philosophy of ministry or application of doctrine. They are not referring to doctrinal differences.

“Issues In WELS” is a group of WELS men and women which seeks to identify issues of concern in the WELS. In general, this group views the disunity in application of doctrine through the lens of doctrine. Church and Change is a group of WELS men and women who seek to share practical examples of application of doctrine with people throughout the WELS. Issues In WELS might say, “Let’s be careful if and when we change application of Scripture. We could lose our pure doctrine and synod!” Church and Change might say, “Let’s be careful that we are not afraid to change application of doctrine as we watch our doctrine. We might fail to get God’s gospel out—and lose our doctrine and synod!” Honestly recognizing, discussing, and adjusting to inherent weaknesses is a growing strength in the WELS.

### The Weakness of WELS Intellectual Christianity

Whether by design or not, each tribe of Christians has filters through which they peer into God’s sacred secrets revealed in his Word. These filters have been put in place by denominational culture. Filters are stubbornly encrusted in place by years of traditionalism re-enforced and defended by the sinful nature of church leaders, pastors, and members. No one sets out to filter the truth of the Scriptures. Filters just happen over time.

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<sup>19</sup> E. Allen Sorum, Doctrinal Presentation/Discussion, Northern Wisconsin District of WELS, 12 June 2006.



One traditional filter in the WELS is our bent toward intellectual Christianity. One WELS woman, a professional educator, has taken note of the downside of WELS intellectual Christianity, especially as it relates to catechism classes for the youth. She has written a paper to share how the WELS can move away from the “museum approach” of teaching to a “grocery store approach” to teaching. She writes:

When going to a museum we view prepared displays with labels and/or information. We admire, we learn something, we move on to the next exhibit. But we are separated from the display by glass or other barriers. We can ask and answer two important questions: What does it say? And what does it mean? A grocery store approach, however, answers additional questions: What does it mean for me? And what am I going to do about it? The work of the gospel is to transform lives, not merely impart knowledge. When we go to the grocery store, we don’t go to admire the colorful display in the produce department. We go with the intent to take something home to eat, to make part of us, to sustain us. Psalm 34:8 tells us to taste and see that the Lord is good.<sup>20</sup>

Unfortunately, the proper emphasis (bias) on intellectual Christianity in the WELS, coupled with a teaching style that is more a “museum approach” than a “grocery store approach,” has put the WELS in a place where it does not want to be. The law of unintended consequences has set in. A sample list of unintended consequences is:

1. WELS Christians are open to sinful pride. Intellectual WELS Christians may think that other Christians do not know their Bibles very well. What is wrong with them? Why do they not get it? The WELS is doing so good!
2. WELS Christians fear other Christian tribes. For example, intellectual WELS Christians see danger in “Holy Spirit-filled Christians,” while “Holy Spirit-filled Christians” see intellectual Christians as almost completely driven by something other than the Holy Spirit. As a result, WELS Christians do not rejoice that God has raised up other Christian tribes. Instead, one goal of Bible study in the WELS is to teach WELS members how truly dangerous other Christians are to WELS pure doctrine.
3. WELS Christians do not speak up about experiences with God. If a WELS Christian has an experience of healing or specific help or direction from God, it is not considered good to be vocal about it or write about it. Such testimonials are

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<sup>20</sup> Jo Anne Thomas, “*Sola Scriptura* or *Sola Catechismus*?”, unpublished paper, 13 June 2002.

not the basis of faith. They are, in fact, dangerous. If others do not have these experiences or emotions, they could be led from the faith because they do not measure up. If WELS members have a touch of healing from God, we may end up depending on that, rather than the Word, as the basis for our eternal salvation (and teach others to do the same). As a result, it is best to be silent if God does something special in our life.

4. Small group Bible studies are slow to be accepted. Small group Bible studies (especially lay-led) may tend toward emotions and testimonials about God's hand in our lives. This is not wrong, but it is not as healthy and safe as an intellectual-based Bible study. Therefore, it is best not to have small groups in the church (or homes)—especially if the pastor is not present. Small groups may also move from a discussion about piety to pietism, as history clearly teaches.<sup>21</sup>
5. Prayer groups are slow to be accepted. Prayer groups focus on what we are doing rather than on what God is doing for us. Therefore, they are dangerous. Prayer groups open up discussion about experiencing God in our lives. Once again, what about the poor person who does not experience a miracle answer to his prayer? He could become confused. It is better not to risk prayer groups.
6. Emotions can lead to emotionalism. Therefore, WELS Christians do not usually discuss the value of emotions in Christianity. The emotions of joy, frustration, anger, sadness, and optimism are seldom expressed as we “work out our salvation in fear and trembling.”

In today's world, where little children grow up being encouraged to share their feelings (for better or for worse), people hunger for groups and churches where Bible-based spiritual emotions and experiences can be discussed. Rather than ignore proper emotions and godly experiences, WELS Christians need to openly accept them and embrace them, keeping them in scriptural bounds. Christian emotion and experience can be a wonderful complement and balance to the blessing of intellectual Christianity. A church body where intellectual Christianity coexists with proper emotions and sharing of God's miraculous help is a blessed church.

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<sup>21</sup> A common reference to this problem is with Philip Jacob Spener, *Pia Desideria*, translated, edited, and with an introduction by Theodore G. Tappert (N.p.: Fortress Press, 1964). The following definitions of the terms “piety” and “pietism” are taken from John M. Brenner, “Piety and Pietism.” Piety: the condition of reverence and devotion to God that comes with faith in Christ. Pietism: making subjective standards of piety and religious experience the essential measure of Christianity or the Christian faith.

### The Weakness of WELS Faithfulness

In one sense there is no trouble with WELS faithfulness. The mantra remains, “Preach the gospel. Hold to the Lutheran Confessions as you go. God will take care of the rest!” True. However, the emphasis on this single aspect of what it means to be a faithful WELS pastor and congregation has grown into the eight hundred pound gorilla in the room. Those who attempt to remind the WELS that “making disciples of all nations” is also a mark of faithfulness (equally important in God’s eyes) sometimes make the gorilla nervous. Those who regularly perform weddings for non-members as a method of outreach may send the gorilla into a frenzy altogether.

Using the word picture of “prime directive” from a Star Trek episode, one pastor summarized the weakness of WELS faithfulness this way, “One group of pastors in the WELS sees their prime directive [what it means to be faithful] as purifying, refining, and protecting the gold of the biblical (Lutheran) truth. A second group sees their prime directive [what it means to be faithful] as getting the biblical (Lutheran) truth out to as many people as possible as quickly as possible.”<sup>22</sup> In most WELS congregations, the first prime directive gets much more attention than the latter. Either prime directive, taken to an extreme (i.e., functional imbalance), may create or widen a faithfulness fissure in the synod—whether that fissure is perceived or real.

On one side of the fissure, some WELS Christians proclaim faithfulness as, “just preach the gospel.” In their minds it is okay, and even a mark of doctrinal purity, that their local WELS flock has been blessed with no adult converts in a year or more and worship attendance is dropping. Such statistics are not alarming nor even seen as a

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<sup>22</sup> Mark Jeske, interview by author, 22 July 2004, Green Bay, Wis.

problem. A summary of their thoughts, based on Internet discussions the author has observed, might be, “We are faithfully preaching the gospel. God predicted that in the end times the hearts of most would grow cold. The numbers (of increase or decrease) are up to God. We are doing our job. We are being faithful. But people are not into the truth of God as they once were. What else can we do as human beings—except preach the gospel? The Parish Services the synod provides take us away from the real issue of faithfully proclaiming the gospel.”

Because their flock remains small, they can carefully and often inspect every sheep or lamb for doctrinally impure thinking or action. What a comfort it is that the flock is a manageable size. The prime directive to faithfulness (i.e., preach the gospel and keep the Word pure) is being accomplished. The flock is shrinking in numbers—of course that is not good—but all is well. God blesses such faithfulness.

On the other side of the fissure, one hears the mantra, “Do not protect the gospel to death—share it loud and proud!” In the minds of people on this side of the faithfulness fissure, some in the WELS are almost silly in their zeal to guard our great gospel treasure. The thinking is that church fellowship zealots work with all kinds of ancient applications of fellowship principles which were designed to protect us from doctrinal error during the Christendom-model days of yesteryear.

A summary of opinions for people on this side of the fissure might be, “I am okay with protecting God’s truth in the Bible with our WELS fellowship principles, but let’s face it. Some of the applications of the principles make no sense to members and non-members alike, especially in our post-Christian and post-modern American world. The world mission field is literally everywhere we are, including right here in Midwest

America. We need to review and adjust applications to our church fellowship doctrine and other doctrines before it's too late.”<sup>23</sup>

For those on this side of the faithfulness fissure, the harvest is ripe now. Therefore, because applications can be adjusted, they must be adjusted, and the sooner the better. The prime directive is to be faithful in getting the gospel message out to as many people as possible, as often as possible, as quickly as possible. If this is done, all will be well. God blesses this kind of faithfulness.

Unfortunately, those holding to a Church and Change emphasis on faithfulness and those holding to an Issues In WELS emphasis on faithfulness are different. Church and Change emphasizes reaching out with the gospel message. Issues in WELS emphasizes protecting Confessional Lutheranism. The WELS needs both sides to stay in balance. Our beloved WELS is in the process of searching for a new normal in our post-Christian and post-modern world. We do well to consider the faithfulness of WELS pastors and leaders who have gone before us. They were able to keep both faithfulness directives in balance. They held to Confessional Lutheranism and worked mightily to spread its gospel message. We do well not to allow any fissures to disrupt us as we move forward toward our new normal together, under the same umbrella of Confessional Lutheran doctrine.

As both sides in the faithfulness debate would agree, the answer to the question of what it means to be a faithful WELS Christian is not with one side or the other, but with both sides. God expects us to hold on to the truth, reject doctrinal error, and reach out with the truth all at the same time. Jesus was faithful in this task. The first century

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<sup>23</sup> This paragraph is the author's summary, based on actual discussions between WELS members on web sites such as Issues In WELS ([www.issuesinwels.org](http://www.issuesinwels.org)), Church and Change ([www.churchandchange.org](http://www.churchandchange.org)), and the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod ([www.wels.net](http://www.wels.net)), from 2003 to 2006.

apostles and disciples were faithful in this task. With God's help the WELS will be faithful too. God is faithful. He will bless our faithfulness.

## CHAPTER NINE

### PURSUING A FAITHFULNESS REVIVAL IN THE WELS

When you go to war...and see an army greater than yours, do not be afraid of them. When you are about to go into battle, the priest shall come forward and address the army. He shall say: "Hear, O Israel, today you are going into battle against your enemies. Do not be faint-hearted or afraid; do not be terrified or give way to panic before them. For the LORD our God is the one who goes with you to fight for you against your enemies to give you victory."

Deuteronomy 20:1-4 NIV

Obviously, the list of important items which mark a faithful Christian or faithful church body could be longer or shorter or different than what will be presented in this chapter. The key is to look closely at several areas of faithfulness. Are we in the WELS being faithful in some areas of God's Word, but allowing ourselves to be weak in others? Are we suffering from faithfulness imbalance which will require a faithfulness revival in the WELS?

Unfortunately, there will always be a struggle in the WELS to keep proper perspective and balance in all areas of faithfulness at the same time, but we should not give up trying to improve or seek a revival in faithfulness. By God's grace, just like an individual Christian, the WELS family can improve its scope and intensity of faithfulness to God's Word. Seminary professor Dan Leyrer describes the struggle to balance the various elements of faithfulness: "Every called worker, commissioned by Christ through the church, must decide how much he or she will focus on reaching out and reaching in with the gospel. It is a natural tension of time for the Christian. For congregations and church bodies, it becomes a tension of money as we decide whether a greater share of our

resources will be used for preserving the truth among us or for reaching out beyond our congregations with the truth.”<sup>1</sup>

Leaders, educators, pastors, and people in the WELS must be faithful in using their God-given strengths, but also faithful in eliminating their sin-produced weaknesses. No longer can we in the WELS give God our standard fare of faithfulness in our well-defined, traditional areas of strength. WELS leaders, educators, pastors, and people need to encourage one another to eliminate our weaknesses in faithfulness. It is a full practice of faithfulness which God blesses fully. Let us pursue a faithfulness revival in the WELS. If we do not pursue a faithfulness revival, we will be wiped off the stage of human (Christian) history. God will use others to do what he is calling us to do.

### **Faithfulness in Personal Devotions**

According to the synod vice president, Wayne Mueller, more than half of WELS pastors do not have a daily devotion.<sup>2</sup> One WELS pastor attempted to discuss the topic of personal devotions at a gathering of his pastor classmates. Nobody admitted to having a daily personal devotion time.<sup>3</sup> Some pastors express the notion that bringing the Word of God to a shut-in, making a hospital visit, reading through a commentary on the Bible, or preparing for the sermon constitutes their personal devotion time. While such activity feeds the under-shepherd’s faith, it does not replace the faithful effort to carve out significant time for the pastor to be alone with the Almighty God in Scripture and prayer exclusively for himself.

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel P. Leyrer, “Loving the Lost Means Loving the Truth: The Inseparable Nature of Outreach and Orthodoxy: A Study of 2 Timothy,” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 102 (Fall 2005): 251.

<sup>2</sup> Wayne Mueller, “The Sixth Chief Part—How Christ Distributes His Grace.”

<sup>3</sup> WELS pastor (name withheld), interview by author, 22 September 2005.



There is a sin of dealing with the Word not with humble awe and fervent faith, but with a cold professionalism. This happens whenever we treat the Bible as mere grist for the intellectual mill... Writing a sermon, teaching Bible History becomes a matter of spitting out bits of useful information. As we do [this] we tell ourselves all is well. But all is not well. You cannot master the true faith as a person might master a lesson in arithmetic. The purpose of studying the truths of the Bible is to bring us... into a living relationship with our Savior Jesus Christ. Anything less is having a form of godliness but denying its power. Therefore among our highest priorities in preaching [must be] a personal one: how does God reveal my sin, strengthen my hope, guide my life?<sup>4</sup>

The situation discussed by seminary president Wendland is not new. Consider the words of Pastor August Pieper from the October 1906 *Quartalschrift*.

Now that which the pastor must promote before everything else is the Scriptures themselves. That must still be and remain his one great study after which all else stand in the background. It is fundamentally perverse when the pastor reads all sorts of merely human books and the Scriptures themselves he neglects. These all should, as Luther says about his own books, only be a crate for the Holy Scriptures. Indeed the pastor needs the Word of God much more for his own soul than the average Christian, because he will be much more tempted than they. Doubt about the truth, weariness in the office of the ministry, bad temper, becoming discouraged and afraid, arrogance and a dictatorial manner, becoming a man-pleaser and a hypocrite, laziness, the lust of the flesh, greed, the lust of the world plague the pastor more than the average Christian. When any of these come, then the needs of daily strengthening through teaching, comfort... admonishment, warning [in the Word] so that his light is not extinguished in the darkness, so that he does not preach to others and himself be a castaway.<sup>5</sup>

The pastor needs significant alone time with his wife. Consider the blessings for himself—and his wife! How much more does the pastor need significant alone time with his heavenly Father. Consider the blessings for himself, his family—and his flock!

Unfortunately, this type of faithfulness is not spoken about much in the WELS. Practical

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<sup>4</sup> Paul O. Wendland, "How God Grows Christians (Keeping Our Gospel Motivation Strong)," paper presented to the WELS Pastors Retreat - Mankato and New Ulm Conferences, Trego, Wis., 7 September 2003, 7.

<sup>5</sup> August Pieper, "Das Schriftstudium Als Die Besondere Aufgabe Des Pastors," *Theologische Quartalschrift* (October 1906): 193-206, translation by D. Deutschlander for Metropolitan North Conference, Milwaukee, 19 September 1983, 3-4.

theology courses at the seminary reference this subject but do not emphasize, explain, model, or teach in depth on it.<sup>6</sup> Rarely are the challenges and joys which await the parish pastor in terms of his personal devotional life discussed in college or seminary classes.

This author recalls only one such discussion in nine years of preparation to become a WELS pastor (1976 to 1985).<sup>7</sup> The faithfulness to the intellectual Christian side of the WELS college and seminary are wonderful and obvious, but more time and attention need to be spent explaining how a called worker develops a personal relationship with God through personal use of the Bible and prayer. At Dallas Theological Seminary, Howard Hendricks taught a three-credit course on getting into the Bible on a personal basis. There is no such course at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary.

If a WELS congregation invites Parish Assistance to help them, the pastor is asked to indicate, in writing, how much time he spends in personal devotion each week. This is a start in the right direction. Unfortunately, the Parish Assistance process is not designed to spend enough time with the information. Also, Parish Assistance is not in every congregation. The circuit pastor, who is to serve as “pastors’ pastor,” does not normally cover the subject of the pastor’s personal devotional life in his annual interview (if one is conducted).

Many WELS pastors need to be called to repentance for not spending significant time alone with their God in Word and prayer. Lack of faithfulness in personal devotions weakens them, their families, and their congregations. The WELS needs pastors who

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<sup>6</sup> Armin W. Schuetze and Irwin J. Habeck, *The Shepherd under Christ*, 13-14.

<sup>7</sup> Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary professor John Jeske took a class period to explain his style of personal Bible reading. This author used that style for the first ten years of his ministry, not knowing what else to do.

have the blessing of a solid personal devotional life. If they do not have that blessing, the WELS needs pastors who are seeking such a blessing from God with all their heart!

This cultural sin in the WELS has left large numbers of WELS members in a spiritual fog. They know the six chief parts of the Catechism. They know what it means to go to church and Holy Communion, but they do not know what it means to have a rich, fulfilling personal devotional life. Sadly, those in the WELS who seek a rich devotional life often learn such things from evangelical or charismatic Christians who inject a non-Lutheran bias (emphasis on emotion or experience) into the personal devotional process.

We need Confessional Lutheran pastors whom God has blessed in this area of their sanctification to stand up and make themselves known. We need WELS members whom God has lead to victory in their personal devotional life to lead others to full faithfulness in this vital area. The WELS is beginning to focus attention on the need for personal interaction in the Word. The Bible study for the 2001 synod convention held in Saginaw, Michigan, was titled “Turning Our Perspective Upside Down.” The Bible study was a reminder to the WELS that all the effort at corporate Bible study may have caused us to lose sight of individual spiritual growth. This author agrees. Imagine what would happen in the WELS if God provided a faithfulness revival in the personal devotional lives of the parish pastors. Let us begin the revival with repentance.

### **Faithfulness in Making Disciples**

Discipleship is both a muddy concept and a crystal clear concept in the WELS. Jesus described in detail what the attitude and actions of a disciple are to be. In brief, disciples of Jesus are to “Hold to his teaching...love one another...bear much fruit...obey everything he has commanded.” (John 8:31, 13:35, 15:8; Matthew 28:19). Jesus was

both a living picture of a disciple of his Father and a living example of how to develop disciples. Discipleship theology in the WELS is not at all muddy. However, as every parish pastor will say, it is not easy to put the neat and clean theology of discipleship into the everyday life and living of those who believe in Jesus as Savior. Jesus himself mentions this challenge in John 8:30 and 31.

WELS pastors have been faithfully explaining the process of discipleship from an intellectual biblical perspective.<sup>8</sup> Still, apart from the Sunday schools, Lutheran elementary schools, and confirmation classes, there are relatively few functioning discipleship models in the local WELS congregations. These discipleship processes are excellent at teaching how to produce a disciple (through the gospel, not the law). This proper emphasis on converting (and keeping a Christian) through the law and gospel has left little room for discussing what a disciple of Christ is to look like, sound like, and accomplish for Christ. God clearly describes his expectations for his disciples in the Scriptures. For many in the WELS, however, there is fear of establishing high discipleship expectations of WELS members. High, clear expectations could lead to legalism (trying to accomplish with the law what can only be truly accomplished by the gospel). This has spooked the WELS away from high expectations of its members.

As the WELS has sought to address the issues of discipleship, the primary discipleship model which has emerged for adults is “Adult Bible Study.” That is wonderful. This model has proven to be a blessing in many ways. Downsides of adult Bible study have emerged, however. Often there is no clear expectation or perceived outcome for adult Bible study. What is the goal of adult Bible study? Too often, if adults

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<sup>8</sup> John F. Brug, “The Lutheran Doctrine of Sanctification and Its Rivals,” 186. Brug provides a list of twelve items which identify the sanctification process as Lutheran.

are in Bible study, they will receive basic doctrine review or review of the Lutheran Confessions. These topics are not unimportant. Instead, adult Bible study could be used to provide a strong training element, where the pastor or leader “prepares God’s people for works of service so that the body of Christ may be built up” (Ephesians 4).

WELS Bible study leaders often utilize synod-produced material with a question and answer format. At times members do not actually use a Bible for a Bible study class. Many Bible study participants do not bring their personal Bibles to Bible class. When these things continue, over time, the goal of the class shifts subtly from “my Bible helps me grow in my living relationship with Christ as God talks to me” to “did I get the answer right in front of all these people?”. Therefore, spending time in a WELS Bible study does not guarantee that a disciple of Jesus is developing. In adult Bible study classes, it is easy to fall into the trap of looking for correct knowledge (which puffs up) rather than how to get better at loving God and others (which builds up).

Many pastors and congregations struggle to develop a discipleship or evangelism model that works for them. Jim H. Lillo, a WELS pastor in Anchorage, Alaska, described his model in a four-page document titled, “The Andrew Plan for Outreach and Assimilation,” which he distributed throughout the WELS. One congregation in the WELS performs marriage ceremonies for unchurched couples, providing they attend two sessions with the pastor. WELS Pastor Rick Johnson, who serves in California, uses a small group model to disciple his people in the Word and service. Randy Hunter, a WELS pastor who serves in Madison, Wisconsin, uses a wide variety of Bible study groups taught by a variety of people in the church to disciple his flock.

It is important to take the gospel-driven passion we have to make disciples and put reality to it. Having no plan brings predictable results. Christians do not disciple themselves. Every congregation needs some style or method or way in which they will seek to evangelize and disciple people forward to Christian maturity. Obviously that task is not easy. Some outside the WELS are doing well and can provide models for us to adapt. In the WELS, unfortunately, positive discipleship models are rare. This is especially true for young people (high school and college age), young men, young fathers, and men in general.

The feminization of American culture and the absent father problem have hit the WELS. Even in the WELS men are seen as dictators or wimps. Jesus was neither. Jesus was a man's man. He was strong and caring, caring and strong. It is an uphill battle to disciple men into a positive role of what it means to be a man of God like Jesus. There are many more efforts to "raise up the women" in the WELS (a great idea) than to "raise up the men" (an even better idea). In the mid-90s, the counseling arm of the WELS, Wisconsin Lutheran Child and Family Service, worked at providing a model to address this problem, but that effort has flagged.

It is not easy to be faithful to the task of making disciples. If we are to make a mistake in discipleship, let us make it on the side of being too bold in expecting our WELS members to live and act and think like Christ. Imagine what would happen in the WELS if God provided a faithfulness revival in the area of discipleship. Let us begin the revival with repentance.

### Faithfulness in Prayer

God's people are to be faithful in walking in the truth (3 John 3). God's people are also to be faithful in prayer (Romans 12:12).<sup>9</sup> Faithfulness to the truth in the WELS is easy to see. Faithfulness to prayer in the synod is not. People in the WELS pray. God, in mercy, hears and answers all the prayers of his people. Unfortunately, there is a lack of zeal, passion, and faithfulness in prayer in the WELS. This is especially true when discussing prayer groups.<sup>10</sup> The Bible clearly establishes the concept of people praying together. For several reasons WELS members (and other Christians) have an aversion to praying in groups.<sup>11</sup> The devil loves this aversion, but God does not.

It is important for WELS Christians to seek one another out for the sole purpose of praying together. The list of prayer needs in our lives, the lives of people we care about, the lives of people we hear about, our WELS churches, our synod, global Christianity, and the non-Christian world is without end. Can we, do we, spend significant time each week in the hard work of praying for other people, or are our minds distracted because we multi-task prayer as we shower, drive the car, or sit in the deer stand?

How much time do we spend praying during our personal devotional time? Do we pray with people over the phone? Do we pray with them or for them after a significant conversation? Do we have a system in place which helps our weak flesh stay awake and alert in prayer? For example, do we utilize a prayer list or prayer cards? Do we pray for people immediately after they say, "Will you please pray for me?" Jonathan Edwards

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<sup>9</sup> Note the Greek word is not *pistos* in either case. But the concept of being faithful in the truth and faithful in prayer are both important and pleasing to God. Both are part of God's will for disciples.

<sup>10</sup> According to information gathered by the author in the course of establishing the WELS Prayer Institute, in the past ten years prayer chains have emerged in the WELS. Their primary function seems to be providing prayer for emergency situations. The purpose and dynamics of a prayer chain are not that of a prayer group.

<sup>11</sup> James B. Banks, "The Teamwork of Prayer: Biblical Precedents for Praying Together," draft copy of D.Min. diss., Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, 2005.

pinned little notes to himself when he went horseback riding so he would not forget thoughts that came to his mind during times of meditation. How can we reinforce our prayer memories?

Prayer ministry requires discipline. Prayer groups provide a framework for prayer discipline so that people can pray for extended periods of time about a variety of subjects which might not usually occur to them. Silent prayer time in a public worship setting might last a minute. In a prayer group much more time can be devoted to a particular subject. A WELS prayer meeting in Green Bay, Wisconsin, often devotes ten to twenty minutes a week in praying for WELS congregations and the synod. It is difficult to set aside twenty minutes in a WELS worship service for such a purpose.

Prayer groups provide support to the prayer partners in the church who become tired or worn down. Although the primary purpose of a prayer group is to pray, such groups also provide an opportunity to review what the Bible says about prayer from a Lutheran Christian perspective. WELS teachers walk people through the missionary journeys of the Apostle Paul with an eye toward reaching out with the gospel. A prayer group could walk through the Book of Acts with an eye toward developing prayer ministry. God has provided many written prayers in the Bible for our benefit today.

According to the 2005 synod statistical yearbook, St. Mark in Green Bay, Wisconsin, was blessed by God with an exceptionally large number of adult converts (forty-four) and one of the highest weekend worship attendance averages (and ratio compared to membership) in the WELS. St. Mark has also developed one of the most active prayer ministries in the WELS. Men gather and pray for the weekend worship services, for the message and those who will hear the message (and other aspects of the worship service).



About 130 members are involved in a wide variety of ways in prayer ministry at St. Mark—prayer meetings, praying over e-mail prayer lists, intercessory prayers after worship services, and other types of praying as individuals and small groups. Is this connection between ministry growth and prayer a coincidence or a specific and special blessing from God in answer to prayer? What would be happening if St. Mark were not a praying congregation?

Prayer is not a means of grace. The Bible makes it plain that long hours and large numbers of praying people do not impress or manipulate God. He is, obviously, above all that. As sinful beggars we cannot by our overwhelming prayer effort wrench a specific blessing from God's hand. (Why would we do that? Jesus ended his prayer with "Nevertheless not my will, but yours be done.") WELS people, however, can (and should) gather to pray to ask the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit to help them reach lost souls, open up hearts to the message they hear, or keep distractions to a minimum! Both prayer gatherings and individuals praying are good things which are God-pleasing.

As WELS Christians pray, special attention needs to be given to God the Holy Spirit. As an equal and honored member of the Holy Trinity, the Holy Spirit often receives short shrift among Confessional Lutherans and other Christians. In Milwaukee, years ago, there was a WELS church named Holy Ghost Evangelical Lutheran Church. Would a WELS home mission church of today name itself Holy Spirit Lutheran Church? If they did, would they be accused of having bought into the charismatic movement? The Bible is clear, "Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit," says the LORD Almighty (Zechariah 4:6). God tells us in Acts 5:30 and 31 that God the Holy Spirit gives God's people the ability to obey his commands. Still, prayer meetings designed to specifically

ask God the Holy Spirit for his gifts are rare in the WELS. “According to survey (1,287 participants) 92 percent indicated that their prayers included thanksgiving to God. 84 percent said that they confessed their sins in prayer. Seventy-eight percent said that they prayed prayers asking for guidance in making decisions. Sixty-six percent asked for deliverance from some trouble. Seventy-five percent said they asked for great faith or some other spiritual blessing for themselves or others. Sixty-eight percent asserted that they gave praise to God. Sixty-four percent asked for physical things for themselves. Only 37 percent have prayed for the Holy Spirit.”<sup>12</sup>

Jesus taught the Lord’s Prayer. In that context he gave a prayer promise, “So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened” (Luke 11:9, 10). In the context of this promise our Savior teaches another prayer concept, “How much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!” (Luke 11:13).

The role of God the Holy Spirit is to convert people to Christ and sanctify them. The Holy Spirit is to convict people of sin, give them trust in Jesus as their only Savior, and teach them all things. His gifts of love, wisdom, peace, self-control, etc. are written in the Scriptures. Christians should especially approach God the Holy Spirit directly and boldly asking him to distribute his many wonderful gifts to themselves, members of the WELS, and others. Pastors and congregations will either depend on their own strength, programs, ideas, and energy—or depend on the Holy Spirit. Praying to God the Holy Spirit on a regular basis helps prune pride and self-reliance which easily creep into

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<sup>12</sup> Joel V. Petermann, *Prayer: An Audience with the King*, The People’s Bible Teachings (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2001), 133-34. This survey was taken among WELS Christians by Petermann, a pastor and district president in the WELS.

ministries. Imagine what would happen in the WELS if God would provide a faithfulness revival in the area of prayer. Let us begin the revival with repentance.

### **Faithfulness in Interacting with Non-WELS Christians**

God's blessings given to non-WELS Christians are undersold in the WELS. The issue of church fellowship (as primarily "mark and avoid" based on Romans 16:17) has been oversold in the WELS. The net result is fear and misunderstanding in the WELS about our relationship with non-WELS Christians. What does it mean to have a meaningful relationship with a non-WELS Christian, and yet not run over or ignore the biblical doctrine of church fellowship? This subject is not addressed much in the WELS. One WELS pastor describes the struggles with church fellowship this way: "Our odd, inconsistent, and not completely Scriptural fellowship doctrine is like an elephant in the room. The longer we keep pretending that everything has been decided and that all is Scriptural, the greater the damage later."<sup>13</sup>

Although it is not stated, the implied answer to the question about interacting with non-WELS Christians is clear. It is easier (best) to stay away from other strong Christians. It is too difficult to figure out how to receive insights or help from them without being burned doctrinally. It is easier to stay away from them rather than patiently help them based on our Confessional Lutheran perspective. The thinking is that if WELS Christians get too close to strong non-WELS Christians, WELS Christians could become confused. If we get close to non-WELS Christians, our number one job, therefore, is to correct their doctrinal error as soon as possible. This will protect them—and help us. This shows our love to God and them.

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<sup>13</sup> E-mail to author dated 1 October 2004.

It is not easy to know how to befriend non-WELS Christians without violating biblical church fellowship principles, but it is important to make the effort. Bible-based Christians can be a mutual blessing to each other—even if they do not practice church fellowship. Perhaps J. P. Koehler would agree. He writes, “This concept of law and gospel and the proper life flowing from it is not a monopoly of the Lutheran Church.”<sup>14</sup> As brothers and sisters in the body of Christ, God is teaching and maturing both WELS and non-WELS Christians through the Word and Sacraments.

Intellectual interaction between WELS Christians and non-WELS Christians has increased dramatically since the 1970s. WELS Christians are exposed to other Christians on television, on the Internet, on the radio, and in bookstores. Because of our mobile American culture and the lack of church fellowship restraints on most non-WELS Christians, personal interaction with other Christians is also on the rise. It is possible for WELS leaders to invite non-WELS Christians to address WELS gatherings. WELS Christians sometimes attend schools, seminars, concerts, and workshops hosted by non-WELS Christians. Non-WELS Christians sometimes attend WELS grade schools, high schools, or Wisconsin Lutheran College. WELS members are marrying committed non-WELS Christians. Interaction between WELS and committed non-WELS Christians is taken for granted in the WELS culture by most.

For some in the WELS, this ubiquitous interaction with non-WELS Christians has generated a healthy review of the unchanging biblical principles of church fellowship and a review of the changeable man-made applications which flow from them. One response to Christian inter-action has been, “Mark and avoid them” (Romans 16:17). Teach

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<sup>14</sup> John Philipp Koehler, “*Gesetzlich Wesen Unter Uns*: Our Own Arts and Practices as an Outgrowth of the Law,” 7.

members of the flock not to interact if at all possible. Almost any interaction would tend to endanger their pure faith. This is a response of genuine love for the members of the flock and an effort to proclaim the truth to the non-WELS Christian. Another emerging response to this challenge of interacting with other Christians has been a growing recognition that we live in a new world of ubiquitous interaction.

Therefore, some Confessional WELS Christians believe it is sometimes proper to interact with Christians outside the framework of church fellowship. Some believe it is increasingly appropriate for WELS Christians to interact with non-WELS Christians in terms of “Christian Fellowship.” This is especially true after a WELS Christian has made their doctrinal differences known. Sometimes the right thing to do is simply offer Christian support and friendship to non-WELS Christians who are beat up by their circumstances. Is Christian marriage or friendship (between a WELS and non-WELS Christian) a matter of church fellowship or Christian fellowship? Is practicing Christian marriage or friendship always outside the framework of fellowship? Should a (WELS and non-WELS) married couple (and their children) worship God together in their home setting? It is time to discuss these issues in the WELS.

Following is a common situation in our American culture today: A Christian co-worker (Southern Baptist) already knows that a WELS Christian does not agree with him on the doctrine of infant baptism (a non-core doctrine in his mind). They have discussed infant versus “believer” baptism many times at work. Today that does not matter. He only knows that a good, loving, and trusted WELS Christian came to wait with him while his father underwent heart surgery. He invites the WELS friend to pray with him. Does

the doctrine of love dictate that the WELS Christian join him in prayer? Or does the doctrine of love dictate that he be taught the doctrine of church fellowship?

Seminary professors who attend meetings to discuss doctrines with representatives from a heterodox church body would not open with a joint prayer—even if asked—for obvious reasons. Unfortunately, not all situations WELS members face on a daily basis are that cut-and-dried. WELS pastors cannot hope to provide a correct, standard, and predetermined answer to fellowship questions. They need to teach and reinforce the biblical principles of church fellowship (especially in terms of Holy Communion). They need to grow our WELS members in God’s truth, in order to help them think through each situation for themselves. Expecting uniformity in response to all situations throughout the WELS flies in the face of reality. The doctrine of Christian love goes in many different directions, depending on the situation.

Brother pastors and fellow members should not quickly judge one another harshly based on what they have heard. Wrong is wrong and must be pointed out. That is still a strength in our synod, but let genuine listening with love take place in a face-to-face setting before judgment is delivered.

A more flexible approach to church fellowship issues is not new in the WELS. Several older pastors indicate that that is the way it used to be before the split with the Missouri Synod changed the focus of the applications of the doctrine. Older WELS pastors were taught the same doctrines as today’s younger pastors, but they were also encouraged to “err on the side of love.”<sup>15</sup> “Examples of uniformity of practice [of the church fellowship principles] would be closed communion, refusing to participate in “ecumenical” services, refusing to exchange pulpits with those not in our

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<sup>15</sup> WELS pastor (name withheld), interview by author, August 2004, Green Bay, Wis.

fellowship...For the most part, we enjoy uniformity of practice in these areas. At the same time, we recognize that uniformity in every application is impossible...There will be times when other principles of Scripture come into play in a certain situation. For example, one WELS school may allow non-member students to sing with their class in church...Another WELS school may not allow non-member students to sing with their class in church.”<sup>16</sup>

The Wauwatosa theology developed by our WELS Lutheran forefathers in the early 1900s worked hard to keep all doctrines in mind when interacting with other Christians. They urged God’s people to exercise a gospel-oriented approach when dealing with Christians of other denominations. In writing about a true biblical ecumenical spirit J. P. Koehler writes:

It consists in this, that I find joy [emphasis added] in the fact that someone else believes in the Lord Jesus Christ, no matter in which fellowship I meet him, and that I can do nothing else than acknowledge him and also in that way my Savior. And as there is opportunity, foster this partnership in salvation in the truth. When I meet anywhere someone who believes in the Lord Jesus Christ, then what interests me above all else is that he so believes and that through faith he is a child of God and a member of the body of Jesus. I will express as much in emphasizing the things that unite us in faith and not, by finding fault and criticizing, mainly emphasize the things that separate us. On the other hand, intellectualism and the lack of an ecumenical spirit, which mutually depend on each other, express themselves with an air of superiority by judging and condemning and thus display the character of legalism. Self-evidently in the evangelical spirit, truth rules. Thus also criticism will not be wanting, but it receives its emphasis through the gospel.<sup>17</sup>

In some ways, we have lost this gospel spirit which was once spoken about in the WELS. When WELS Christians interact with other Christians, at times there is a spirit of

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<sup>16</sup> Jeffrey Holtan, “The Framework of Fellowship: What Does This Mean?”, paper presented to the WELS Northern Wisconsin District Pastoral Conference, Iron Mountain, Mich., 24-25 October 2005, 11.

<sup>17</sup> Curtis A. Jahn, ed., *The Wauwatosa Theology*, vol. 2 (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1997), 247-8.

fear (what doctrine will I risk losing if I attend this non-WELS-sponsored Christian event, or what if a WELS person finds out I am attending?). The emphasis on the doctrine of church fellowship has pushed some in the WELS into thinking that it is not wholesome, good, or beneficial to spend time with other Christians. Instead, it is extremely dangerous—and unwise. For the most part this attitude was not “taught” in the WELS. Rather, it was “caught” in the WELS.

WELS Christians will not run to pray with, work with, or worship with non-WELS Christians. Each church body has their own setting for such church fellowship. Church fellowship principles are a blessing from God. There are times and places when it is good to refuse to worship with, pray with, or spiritually interact with other Christians. Confessional Lutherans need to appreciate historical doctrinal differences with other Christian bodies. WELS Christians need to understand the liberalism and non-biblical rot that has ruined many, many so-called Christian groups—and could ruin the WELS too. WELS Christians cannot unite with doctrinal error. That would be disastrous—and be a mark of unfaithfulness to God.

On the other hand, it is important that WELS Christians learn to interact with non-WELS Christians. As stated earlier, this is already happening. WELS leaders and pastors need to discuss this openly and honestly, rather than allow fear or secrecy to continue to weave its way into the situation. Pastors will not always advise their members to interact with other Christians in the same way. There will be different applications of the same biblical church fellowship principles.

For example, one WELS pastor may decide to involve himself in worship and prayer when he attends a seminar or school that is not WELS-operated. He may think: “This is



an opportunity for me to be supported and support Christian brothers and sisters in Christian fellowship. This is not the time or place to focus on church fellowship. I will deal honestly with my Confessional Lutheranism if it comes up, but in love, I will not lead with the doctrine of church fellowship.”

Another WELS pastor may decide not to participate. He may think: “This is a situation where I must stand up for the truth of Confessional Lutheranism. If I do not, I will dishonor my self and my Savior. Praying and worshipping with these Christians here and now would give them the wrong impression. Doctrinal truth matters. I must lead with church fellowship—not Christian fellowship.” What are we to do when we find ourselves disagreeing over the application of a scriptural principle?

This is when we are to make use of the blessings of fellowship. We recognize that as long as we agree on the scriptural principles and act according to them we enjoy full unity. A benefit of unity is the ability to speak to one another frankly and lovingly as brothers. There is danger here, however. The danger is that we don’t take the time to talk to each other. The danger is that we begin to violate the Eighth Commandment and ruin the reputation of others. The danger is that we use language and terminology that is not fitting for servants of the Gospel. There are many dangers here. Let’s not only emphasize that Scripture would have us separate from persistent errorists, but also that Scripture directs us to conduct ourselves as Christian gentlemen. This is not to suggest that we pull back from constructive criticism where it is necessary. This too is part of preserving our fellowship. Humanly speaking it is easy for us to agree to disagree. It is far more difficult to “keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.” It takes work to preserve our fellowship. Without God’s help we are not able to preserve a God-pleasing unity.<sup>18</sup>

It is not easy to trust one another, stay calm, and discuss things in a loving family relationship—especially when different applications emerge. (A family may agree in principle to go on vacation to California. All agree, but there may be much disagreement on where to stay or how to get there.) The same can be true as WELS Christians interact

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<sup>18</sup> Jeffrey Holtan, “The Framework of Fellowship,” 12-13.

with non-WELS Christians. We are to stand up for God's truth. We are to avoid persistent error, but what does that mean for me, in this place, in this situation? Will we trust, stay calm, and discuss different applications which flow from biblical principles we all hold dear?

Some might say, "It is best to stay out of harm's way. Let's try hard to avoid as much interaction as possible with other Christians and simplify the matter." Others might say, "Let's write more policies." Yet today's realities of interacting with other Christians are much more numerous and complex than they were in 1955 or even 1975.

Confessional Lutheran Christians are members of the body of Christ—together with other non-WELS Christians. How will we interact with the body of Christ and stay true to the Bible? It is time for the WELS to diligently review our applications of church fellowship and Christian fellowship doctrines. Imagine what would happen in the WELS if God would provide a faithfulness revival in the area of interacting with other Christians. Let us begin our revival with repentance.

### **Faithfulness in Sowing Additional Ground**

It is relatively easy for WELS Christians (or any Christians) to sow gospel seed among their own members or those who are familiar with and receptive to basic Christian doctrine but have strayed away from organized Christianity. It is a tremendous challenge to get up close and personal with unbelievers who know nothing about the Bible, do not understand Christian doctrine or culture, or have been taught that Christianity is essentially bad for people. Reaching out to weak or straying Christians is one thing. Reaching out to non-Christians, who do not know the Bible at all or are initially hostile to

Christianity, is essentially cross-cultural ministry. The average WELS congregation needs to risk crossing over to the less known field and sow good seed.

Most Christians in America do not realize the immense effort required to cross the culture divide between “good citizen and WELS Christian” and “good citizen but anti-Christian.” Faced with this challenge, the sinful nature in God’s people and pastors lulls them toward the soft, pillowy Christian life where true sacrifice is only a noble concept. The sinful nature whispers, “Do not do the hard work of cross-cultural ministry. Find safe and easy people to work with. Some people are ‘church shopping;’ follow up on them. Visit people in your flock and strengthen them. If safe and easy sheep come near—convert them to Confessional Lutheranism. You are being faithful. You are near retirement. Spend time with your grandchildren and your new computer. You are being faithful by writing your sermon, preparing a Bible class, and looking after your hurting members.” Our sinful nature is loud and clear and makes so much sense. Our sinful nature is in league with the devil, the father of lies.

Satan is the master of the half-truth. Satan allows for partial faithfulness.<sup>19</sup> It is a mark of faithfulness to visit members of the flock. It is a good thing for pastors to seek wandering and lonely souls, leading them back to a closer relationship with their God through more regular use of the Word and Holy Communion. It is a good thing for the pastor to preach a solid sermon and conduct a well prepared, winsome Bible study class. He may even spend fifty or sixty hours a week doing these things. However, being faithful to Jesus’ command to “go and make disciples” means much more.

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<sup>19</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters, with Screwtape Proposes a Toast* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1959).

We believe that the Word works. Therefore, it follows that if we sow the Word in more and more non-Christian hearts, our harvest of eternal souls, including many who will choose to become Confessional Lutherans along their journey to heaven, will increase. God promises a greater harvest to those who sow generously (Isaiah 55:11, 2 Corinthians 9:6). This does not mean the local church will always grow numerically. It means if the Word goes out more often to more and more people, the Kingdom of God will grow.

Too much of the time pastors and congregations sow into the same hearts year after year. Some pastors and congregations may sow into an additional 50 to 250 souls a year, but generally they share the gospel with the same people over and over again, year after year. That is being faithful with the Word. However, being fully faithful means that pastors and congregations lead their flocks to go out to those who have not yet had an opportunity (at least for many years) to hear the comforting voice of the Good Shepherd. Such a shift to faithfulness in sowing additional acres with the seed each year requires a heart filled to overflowing with God's love for eternally damned souls. Members of the WELS and seminary professors at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary recognize that a heart for damned souls is important, but such a heart is difficult to develop.<sup>20</sup>

This attitude of reaching out to unsaved souls is on the increase in the WELS. The home and world mission fields have set the pace for years. Groups such as the Lutheran Women's Missionary Society (LWMS), the Organization of WELS Lutheran Seniors (OWLS), and Jesus Cares Ministries (serving the developmentally disabled) have contributed mightily to the effort. For the past several years, the Church and Change group and the "Large Church Conferences" have been providing outreach models to

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<sup>20</sup> Seminary evaluation team, July 2006.

discuss, adjust, and emulate. The television ministry “Time of Grace” is reaching out to thousands. Several “Steady Eddies” are getting into the game at a more intense level. The synod has produced excellent outreach materials and programs for pastors and members to use when personally sharing their faith. A wonderful new web site called “What About Jesus?” is in place.<sup>21</sup>

The good efforts to sow Jesus’ love onto new ground (where only, or mostly, hell-bound people reside) must continue, be supported, and be encouraged. Cross-cultural outreach efforts must be even more aggressive. The WELS leaders must not give a trump card to those who consider it a mark of personal faithfulness to “watchdog, judge, or criticize with brotherly concern” those who are reaching out in “new and different ways.”

Let pastors, members, and synod leaders sow God’s love on new soil with reckless love. If someone crosses over a doctrinal boundary in the process, may the WELS members, pastors, and leaders deal with them in a loving spirit. May the WELS not be guilty of playing it safe or hiding its talent when the master returns for an accounting. Imagine what would happen in the WELS if God would provide a faithfulness revival in the area of sowing additional ground with the gospel. Let the revival begin with repentance.

### **Faithfulness in Accountability**

WELS members struggle to hold their pastor accountable. The pastor has a divine call to serve the Almighty God. Who is the church council to hold him accountable? The church is not a business. The pastor struggles with being held accountable by the laity.

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<sup>21</sup> What About Jesus?: [www.whataboutjesus.com](http://www.whataboutjesus.com).

After all, he receives his orders from God through the Word—not the people. Such is the accountability paradox in the church. Church councils do not like it. The devil loves it.

There are other accountability paradoxes in the WELS. For example, there is usually tight accountability associated with doctrinal purity, unity of practice, and worship purity. In contrast, there is usually no accountability if a pastor (or his congregation) chooses not to increase outreach efforts for five years or chooses to train no men and women to do corporate or personal evangelism work. Congregation presidents dare not ask the pastor if he has been faithful in his personal devotional life or met any unbaptized people that week.

Circuit pastors and district presidents have the assigned authority and duty to watch over doctrine and practice in the Synod. Their good track record in this effort is evident to most in the WELS. There is, however, no clear corresponding authority and duty to make sure pastors are faithfully serving in all the biblically assigned areas of ministry. The failed track record of this is also evident.

A full-time, called WELS parish pastor took down a vibrant, functioning congregation in about three years. He lived about an hour's drive from the church he served. According to parishioners, he worked less than forty hours a week (some parishioners said much less). In the years this pastor served the flock, he developed no new ministries and made few visits (some parishioners said none). Because his doctrine was pure, it took a long time for the WELS to hold him accountable for scattering God's flock. Once graduation from the seminary takes place, there is virtually no accountability provided from the synod to ensure that the pastor they have put out onto the field is being

faithful. If a pastor has a moral lapse, he will soon be dismissed. If a pastor neglects the souls of his straying sheep, there will be no questions asked.

This lack of pastoral accountability is understandable because the seminary expects that their pastors are “good to go” upon graduation. Men and women of the WELS expect their pastor to understand what it takes to lead a local church, especially after eight to twelve years of training. If their pastor needs help in leadership, they expect him to ask for help, train someone, or accept someone to assist him in leading the flock. Unfortunately, that is not always the case. As the WELS becomes increasingly diverse, many WELS pastors are “first generation.” Their father was not a WELS pastor (nor their uncle), so they have no natural accountability or personal model to follow.

The circuit pastors and district presidents, whose responsibility it is to assist parish pastors and congregations when things are not going well, are overwhelmed with day-to-day responsibilities at their local churches. In terms of accountability, there is no time to be pro-active—only reactive—and even that requires time for long meetings which most circuit pastors and district presidents do not have readily available.

Accountability is not legalism. Therefore, this author suggests two solutions for providing positive accountability for the local pastor. First, the seminary would begin teaching students what accountability is all about before they get out into the parish. The training system in the WELS needs to help students understand the positive nature of accountability. The seminary would walk each student through an evaluation while in school. Academic accountability is a given in our WELS schools. The accountability list at Martin Luther College and the seminary would go beyond that. Supervisors of the

vicars would be selected and trained by the seminary. That would ensure reasonable uniformity in vicar activity and evaluation.

When a candidate is assigned to serve in his first full-time setting, the calling body would agree to specific terms. They must cooperate with the synod (who paid the lion's share of the cost of training the pastor) in evaluating their newly assigned pastor for his first three to five years of ministry. The synod could provide an on-site evaluation or train a layperson to do the work. Pastors have a sinful nature. Accountability is not legalism. Accountability is love in action for both the called worker and the congregation who called him.

Second, WELS leaders may need to openly admit something they already know in their hearts. The world in which pastors serve is non-Christian and post-modern. It is extremely complex, challenging, and difficult. It wears down pastors and their families. Therefore, just as the synod spends time, money (staff), and effort following up on its home and world missionaries, it may need to do the same for its local parish pastors. Full-time or part-time paid people could be brought in to do this work.

Some would insist that the WELS has no money for such a thing as a full-time (or even part-time) paid circuit pastor system. Many voices will bellow, "We simply cannot afford to do something like that!" This author suggests that we cannot afford not to do it. In the Old Testament the priests retired at age fifty. They became trainers for the younger priests. As more and more faithful WELS pastors retire, they could be asked to serve in this area. Mature laymen could also serve. This dynamic would help in many ways.



Worn down pastors could retire sooner. The WELS would get more bang for the buck after a pastor turned fifty-five. (Pastors coasting into retirement is an identified problem in the WELS.) The early retired pastor could get out from under the full load of the parish ministry while still healthy enough to serve as a full-time or part-time paid circuit pastor. The retired pastor, who has honed his skills, becoming wise and spiritually mature in the process, would have an important ministry to serve his Lord (and synod) in retirement.

This new circuit pastor arrangement would be one way to allow the volunteer circuit pastor to spend more time with his flock or family. This author believes that if this concept were not mandated but put into place where natural situations emerged, WELS members would see its value and find ways to pay for it. What would happen if God would provide a faithfulness revival in the WELS in the area of accountability to full faithfulness. Let our revival begin with repentance.

### **Faithfulness in Diversity, Flexibility, and Common Sense**

At times WELS pastors and congregations suffer from rigidity. They unknowingly buy into the old definition of insanity, “Doing the same thing over and over again but expecting different results.” The WELS must learn to fight for rigidity in terms of doctrine but learn to be flexible and diverse in terms of application of doctrine. A few areas where WELS cultural rigidity has set in include worship styles, the roles of men and women, and church polity (structure and decision making processes).

Some local WELS congregations cling to *Robert’s Rules of Order* and quarterly voters’ meetings as if they were handed down from Mount Sinai by Moses, if not God

himself. Some pastors do not allow women to speak at or attend voter's meetings. Instead, in their congregational meetings women must sit off to the side or in the back. Pastors have expressed the fear that the strong women of the congregation will (or possibly will), either knowingly or unknowingly, exercise undue influence or intimidate the men present. This would rob the men of their authority of leadership in the church.

Common Sense thinks to itself, "Something is wrong with this picture." It must remain true that Mr. Common Sense shall not be allowed to trump doctrine. The Bible is clear that men are "the head" of women (Genesis 3:9, 17 and I Corinthians 11:3), whether or not that makes sense to anybody in 2006. However, Common Sense should have a say when it comes time to apply doctrine. Has the WELS become rigid in thinking there is a right way and wrong way when it comes to a decision-making structure in the churches? "Lutherans alone, of the ecclesiastical movements of the day, refused to absolutize any forms of polity or ceremony. Behind this refusal was the profound instinct that the gospel's purpose transcends the creation of particular forms or liturgical rubrics or social conventions or methods. Any forms which make for the free and authentic proclamation of the Good News and which effectively nourish Christian faith-life are usable forms in their own time and place."<sup>22</sup>

The WELS needs to ask the question (in fact, many are asking already), "Is not there a God-pleasing, yet more culturally appropriate way for a local gathering of God's people to make decisions as a congregation other than a male-only vote where women are told to listen in silence?" Some men and women in the WELS are asking additional questions. "Is not there a better way for God's people to fully utilize the amazing talents of spiritually passionate and mature women in our WELS churches?"

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<sup>22</sup> Leigh D. Jordahl, introduction to *The History of the Wisconsin Synod*, xvii.

Happily, some WELS leaders are asking these and other question about church structure and the role of men and women. Leaders at the seminary and the synod headquarters are searching for ways to give women a significant voice in decision making in the churches and are welcoming their leadership gifts into the churches, without violating biblical principles.<sup>23</sup> Increasingly, women in the WELS are serving as advisory members at church council meetings. Congregations are utilizing “Family Forums” which see all members, both men and women, on an equal basis; especially if the decision is not binding or is non-doctrinal in nature. Spiritual WELS women do not want to run the church. They want to participate and serve the church with all the gifts God has given them.<sup>24</sup>

One growing congregation in Wisconsin has had no voter’s meetings for about five years. Decisions to purchase land, add outreach ministries, and add part-time staff have been made by the church council in consensus with the Family Forum, which includes both men and women. In this model, doctrine and discipline situations are handled by the men in a male-only vote (with advice from the women). However, since this governing model has been implemented, no doctrinal disputes, difficult discipline cases, or major disagreements have emerged.

People serving at the synod offices, Parish Assistance, and the seminary (especially under the leadership of Bruce Becker, Ron Heins, and Paul Wendland) have been working to make sure that the WELS remains firm in doctrine, yet flexible in application. God is steadily moving the WELS toward diversity of application of doctrine, flexibility in its church structures, more God pleasing (full) use of women’s gifts and talents, and

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<sup>23</sup> Parish Services, together with the seminary, is studying these issues through task force committees.

<sup>24</sup> Based on conversations with WELS women involved in ministries such as Jars of Clay, the WELS Prayer Institute, and Church and Change.

variety in worship styles. Mr. Common Sense is being allowed a voice at the table.

Some argue, “These changes are too slow—and not far-reaching enough. At this pace of change the WELS will not survive.” Others argue, “These kinds of adjustments in application of doctrine are the Trojan horse which has made its way into the WELS, and will most certainly lead to her doctrinal ruin.”

Finally, however, the only thing that matters is what God says. As adjustments are made, we need to stay close to all the biblical principles involved. We must trust that God loves us in the WELS, not because of who we are, but because of who he is. If we study his Word and beg his guidance in prayer, he will most certainly lead us. Imagine what would happen in the WELS if God would provide a faithfulness revival in the area of common sense. Let us begin our revival with repentance.

## CHAPTER TEN

### WILL THE WELS PUT FIRE OR WATER ON ITS REVIVAL?

You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God...submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Grieve, mourn, and wail...Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.

James 4:4, 7-10 NIV

Many non-WELS Christians comprehend the need for revival in their North American churches. They are working toward revival within their own denominational or associational culture and situation according to their understanding of what revival is all about. In their own settings, they have dedicated their lives and ministries to stockpiling fuel for a revival fire. They fervently pray that God shows up soon with the matches. Perhaps they have gone into the ditch of doctrinal impurity according to our Confessional Lutheran understanding of things, but they would not intentionally displease their Savior—or put water on the fires of revival. They are Bible-believing Christians who see the church, their families, their country, and the world headed in the wrong direction. They are anxious, worried, and upset—so many people are being hurt! God, come and rescue us! That is the cry of their heart.

WELS, of course, is not alone or unique in its struggles to survive and thrive in a post-modern, post-Christian culture. The devil's attacks on America have weakened and wounded WELS Christians—along with every other Christian group. Materialism, sex outside of the marriage bond, Internet pornography, abortion, evolution, homosexuality, and divorce are enthroned as normal and acceptable lifestyle choices in contemporary America. Many Christian churches in America have bought into these sins to a high

degree and have lost their saltiness. As a result, many church buildings have literally become museums and restaurants.

The United States government stands poised to legislate American Christian churches to death. The jihadists of radical Islam, who almost took over Europe in Luther's day, are back in force. The shrinking numbers of Bible-believing disciples in the once vibrant Christian churches of Bohemia (the Moravians), Germany, England, and America stand shell-shocked with their hands limp at their sides. They are weak, worn down, and worn out. Faith that God the King cares enough to turn things around—even in America—dwindles. This hopeless, helpless feeling surges through the hearts of many of the King's subjects.

In spite of the storm clouds, this author and others believe that God will significantly refresh his North American churches before Jesus returns. God is love. God is faithful. That is the only basis for the opinion. This author sees a faithful God stirring in the hearts of Christians from many church bodies throughout the United States. There seems to be a growing, restless desperation among a cross-section of faithful Christians. Will God enter into human history in a powerful way as he did during the Lutheran Reformation? As we wait to find out, our job is to get into the Word! Our job is to repent! Our job is to pray! We must completely depend on God's forgiveness, mercy, and love.

If God sweeps through North America in revival (and no one knows if it will happen, or when, or to what degree), several questions come to mind. Will the close-knit culture of the WELS, with its accumulated emotional pain, sad stories, and tendency to aggressively protect the Word rather than share it, prevent it from hoisting its sails and

riding the winds of revival alongside the other Christian church bodies? Will the WELS be able to faithfully hold to its identity as God's voice for Confessional Lutheranism, while interacting with other Christians (supporting and being supported where appropriate)? Will the WELS pioneers of today be put out of the synod or marginalized for the sake of keeping unity in the WELS body? Will a critical mass of laity, pastors, synod leaders, teachers, and seminary professors in the WELS embrace the concepts of biblical revival and be prepared if and when God comes to the rescue? No one, of course, can answer these questions but God.

However, this author believes that the struggles the WELS and American Christianity have experienced since the 1960s will ultimately be used by God to cleanse and strengthen the Bible-based North American churches. The de facto European Christendom model which we see gasping for air in American Christianity today will be swept away for good, as was the Roman Empire. In its place, God will raise up a leaner, more passionate, more flexible, more Bible-based body of Christ in North America. The liberal ecumenical movement which is built on seeing God as loving and tolerant will be replaced by Bible-based Christians who have a lot in common and interact to a relatively high degree, but who will most likely choose to maintain their distinct tribal existence because of their historic doctrinal differences.

In the new revived Christian world order, WELS members will still value and practice their brand of church fellowship. They will remain unique Confessional Lutheran Christians. However, WELS leaders, pastors, and members will be more comfortable thinking in terms of what it means to be a Christian first and a Confessional Lutheran Christian second. WELS Christians will increasingly see the devil, the world,

and our sinful nature as the common enemy of all that supports Christ, rather than focusing in on all other Christians as a primary source of danger to a WELS soul. WELS Christians will become more comfortable with a wide variety of applications of doctrine in different WELS ministries, seeing those differences as a positive check and balance in the church body. No longer will there be fear that all is not right in the WELS because all is not done almost exactly the same way.

Obviously, this shift will not come easy to the WELS, but it is well underway. As the changes continue, there will need to be ongoing careful searching of the Scriptures. There will need to be ongoing, open, and honest discussions of potential new applications of doctrine—as well as discussions about the fears each side has if they are put into play. Some will choose to leave, thinking the synod has become too liberal or too conservative or too something, but in the long run this shift to become a more appropriately open WELS world will provide a win-win situation for Bible-based North American Christian churches and the WELS. By God’s grace, the WELS will put fire on its revival.

### **Has Revival Begun in the WELS?**

God is faithful. He has continually been reviving the WELS through Word and Sacrament since its inception. We recall the revival efforts of those who sought to organize a better Lutheran church body in Wisconsin in 1850. We also remember the efforts of those who developed the synod and training schools through the first half of the twentieth century, as well as those pioneers who stirred the synod to action after the breakup of the Synodical Council (Chapter Eight).

These men have helped set the table for the feast of positive spiritual change in our generation. The seeds of their gospel-motivated attitudes and ministries are beginning to



grow aboveground where people can notice them and be encouraged by them. It is not unusual to look back after God brings revival and see the seeds God had mercifully planted in times past. It was that way in Boston before the revival of 1842. “If we look back 30 years, when the Old South, of all the original Congregational churches of Boston, stood alone upon the platform of the fathers [the Bible], well may we exclaim, What hath God wrought! To advance the cause of evangelical religion, brethren of different [Congregational] churches have volunteered to go and form new churches. God has greatly blessed these efforts. The same Holy Spirit that was poured out upon the churches around Massachusetts Bay, when they were first planted, has returned, and is turning back the captivity of this portion of Zion...He that has multiplied in Boston one church into fourteen, will not now abandon them.”<sup>1</sup>

Are there signs that God has planted seeds toward a full revival in the WELS over the past years? A partial list of newer and vibrant WELS para-church ministries follows. It does not matter who began them—the synod, a district, a cooperative effort, a group of WELS Christians—God, of course, ultimately deserves credit. Think back forty years. Where were these ministries then, or others like them? Are these the seed ministries in which God will develop the attitudes, training, and experiences which he will use as the basis for revival in the WELS?

- Gospel Outreach '89 has been greatly blessed by God.<sup>2</sup> In 1988, there were four WELS churches in the immediate Green Bay area (St. Mark, St. Paul's, First Lutheran, and Mount Olive). Their combined average weekend attendance was 1,541. An aggressive district mission board, under the direction of Dave Pagel, worked to do better. They invited Gospel Outreach (GO '89) into the area. Today, there are six WELS congregations with weekend worship attendance of

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Moore, *Boston Revival, 1842*, 66-67.

<sup>2</sup> GO '89: A mass media campaign under John Barber in 1989 in the Fox Cities area of Wisconsin (and beyond).

2,370. Compare this increase with the decline in the synod as a whole over the same period of time.

- The Board for Home Missions reported that it has helped establish sixty-seven outreach ministries since February 2004. Many of the sixty-seven are being mentored by their district mission boards and receive limited funding from the synod Board for Home Missions.<sup>3</sup> Instead of the cookie-cutter approach to beginning new ministries which was working well in the 80s and 90s, the synod, district mission boards, and local congregations are working together (with less red tape) to launch more lean and flexible ministries, especially in cross-cultural ministry.
- The world mission field is literally coming back to towns in America. St. John's in Wauwatosa, not long ago a bulwark of "Milwaukee Germans," has recently been blessed with an outreach to the Chinese population in Milwaukee. Many in the WELS have had their hearts and eyes opened to cross-cultural ministry opportunities by inner-city Milwaukee efforts, continuing presentations sponsored by the Lutheran Women's Missionary Society, and the wonderful growth of foreign mission fields such as Africa and India. Under the direction of Dan Koelpin, the world mission field remains flexible in approach and has become a partner in assisting "world mission work" back in North America. A Joint Mission Council now assists in this process. A new effort called WELS Multi-Language Publications has been established in El Paso, Texas.
- Friends of China is a ministry established by Pastor Loren Steele. Because of Steele and those who supported him, many WELS members are traveling directly to China to teach English as a second language. Friends of China is not supported financially by the synod (because of international sensitivity). From the beginning this ministry was birthed through the efforts of individual WELS members banding together to do the work which God had put before them.
- The Hmong and other Asian ministries in North America are doing well. God used the ministries begun by Loren Steele and others to open doors for the WELS to serve many Hmong and Asian men in North America. The Pastoral Studies Institute (PSI), which is designed to help men from non-American cultures to receive full training as WELS pastors at our seminary in Milwaukee, was created by Paul Wendland. The need to train Asian men as pastors has grown rapidly. Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, therefore, has called professor Allen Sorum to dedicate more time to the Pastoral Studies Institute. To complete the cycle of the gospel, some Asian men trained in the PSI program have returned to Asia, baptizing many people in their native land. The WELS is adjusting its style of training full-time called workers to meet the demands of a changing world.

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<sup>3</sup> "Board for Home Missions recounts blessings," WELS Communication Services press release dated 24 February 2006, retrieved from WELS web site:  
<http://www.wels.net/cgi-bin/site.pl?2617&contentID=48841&collectionID=881&seq=5>.

- Martin Luther College students now have an opportunity to travel overseas. Students are equipped and encouraged to teach English as a second language to people in Taiwan, Bulgaria, China, Mexico, Columbia, the Czech Republic, and the Dominican Republic.<sup>4</sup> Such opportunities were not available only a few years ago. This effort at Martin Luther College will certainly help graduates develop a world mission spirit. They will live out the reality that there are other forms and styles of ministry which God blesses besides those developed in midwestern America for German Lutherans. Our WELS school system is beginning to appreciate and reflect the reality of our global culture.
- Other positive ministries in the WELS include Wisconsin Lutheran College (training generations of Confessional Lutheran lay leaders), “Time of Grace” (television ministry which reaches hundreds of thousands each week), WELS Kingdom Workers (focuses on putting lay people to work in a variety of settings), Jesus Cares (serving the developmentally disabled), Prison Ministry Outreach (a rapidly growing ministry under Bob Pasbrig), Northwestern Publishing House (making biblical, Confessional Lutheran-based materials readily accessible to many), the technology effort (focusing on use of Internet to share the Word, under Martin Spriggs), Parish Assistance (the church consulting ministry), and area Lutheran high schools and preschools. Each of these ministries is an awesome story of God’s blessings on the WELS. Each ministry has provided opportunity for the WELS to expand, do things in different ways, and watch God the Holy Spirit change lives through the simple means of grace—in amazing ways.

Most WELS members do not get to see God changing lives in visible ways with amazing numbers, but God is at work in the WELS. There are visible numerical positives in the WELS. God is faithful, but such blessings are not to be confused with the blessing of revival. A revival in the classical sense would include many, many of the WELS congregations experiencing astounding numerical turnarounds. That has not happened yet. At this point, God is preparing the WELS. God is testing our faithfulness as individuals, local congregations, and a synod. God is searching hearts. God is shaping attitudes. God is on the lookout for those who are faithful. By his grace, through both numerical success and failure, God has forged faithful folks in the WELS.

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<sup>4</sup> Laurie Biedenbender, “Open Doors around the World,” *Forward in Christ* 92 (November 2005), retrieved from WELS web site: [www.wels.net/cgi-bin/site.pl?1712&cxDatabase\\_databaseID=1&id=8596&magazine=Forward%20in%20Christ](http://www.wels.net/cgi-bin/site.pl?1712&cxDatabase_databaseID=1&id=8596&magazine=Forward%20in%20Christ).

There are leaders in the WELS who have the courage to “feed the winners” and “starve the losers” so that God’s work can get done. There are local congregation leaders who continue to fight for ways to spend the majority of their time, energy, and money on things that God is using to advance the kingdom of God, rather than run church programs that God has long since stopped blessing. Unfortunately, however, there are still many who do not understand the issues of revival or who will not accept the changes in their congregations that need to be made to prepare them for revival. They are married to the blessings of old wineskins, while God is pouring out new wine.

As leaders, pastors, and members observe what is going on in the WELS, some think the WELS is moving closer to revival. Others think the WELS is moving further away from revival. It is clear though, that WELS has not experienced a revival at this point in its history. There has been no “explosion of God” in the hearts of the people as they hear the Word and receive the Sacraments week after week in our North American churches. God has quietly kept many in saving faith and has given some evangelism plusses, some progress in areas of organization and technology, some wonderful growth in a few local congregations, and several noteworthy visible positives in para-church ministry programs. However, this does not constitute a revival.

If God the Holy Spirit is to fully pour himself out on our beloved WELS in full-scale revival, there is work for leaders, pastors, and members in the WELS to do. God is waiting. Will the WELS joyfully hoist its sails to catch the wind of revival and vigorously pray to God to send one, or will the WELS just keep busy keeping busy? No one can create a revival, but God expects his people to prepare for revival so that they are awake and ready to embrace it the moment it arrives.

### **The WELS Needs to Embrace Revival**

What would it mean for the WELS to embrace revival? Hopefully, the reader understands from the first five chapters of the thesis that without revival the WELS will continue to decline. There may be sparks of hope now and then because the Word works, but, in general, the WELS is in significant emotional pain. The WELS is spiraling downward with nothing to stop it but God himself. Hopefully, the reader understands from Chapter Six that God is bigger than any problems the WELS (and America) is experiencing at this point in its history—and that God may have already sown seeds of people and resources which he will use to bring revival out of nowhere. Hopefully, the reader understands what a revival is all about and that it is vital to prepare for revival and determine to cooperate with God before, during, and after God brings in revival (Chapter Seven). Hopefully, the reader understands from Chapters Eight and Nine that the WELS has strengths which God can use in revival, and that one important preparation step is to expand the functional definition of faithfulness in the WELS.

Hopefully, the reader understands that these concepts which the author emphasizes are not new in the WELS, but only buried under “church busyness” and “out of focus” in many of our congregations. Faithfulness requires that we scrape away encrusted layers of church busyness and focus our attention on embracing the concepts of biblical revival at this point in our history. This author suggests full attention be paid to the following as a way to embrace revival. Note that points 1, 3, 4, and 5 were developed in Chapter Nine. Point 6 is the follow-up to issues discussed in Chapter One. Point 2 will be more fully developed in this chapter. The points are listed and summarized here for emphasis as suggested steps toward revival.

1. Pastor and teacher candidates need to be taught how to get into their Bibles on a personal basis, not an intellectual basis. God, the Holy Spirit, convicts of sin, shows us our Savior, and changes our lives through the Word of God. Our leaders and pastors need to be in the Word of God as often as possible so that God, the Holy Spirit, can change them through personal use of law and gospel. Intellectual study is needed (commentaries, charts, maps, etc.), but going nose to nose with God—alone—in the Word is at least as important. Reading a brief devotion and tossing up a two-minute prayer do not provide enough spiritual energy and “prayer cover” to fight the battles today’s WELS pastor or teacher faces on a daily basis. God’s leaders need to turn off the television, the computer, and the Christian music. They need to shut out the distractions and open up their Bibles. They need to pray in the Spirit on all occasions. They need to humble themselves before God and ask him to make good his promise to turn them into “little Christs” as they read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest his Word for themselves. Embracing revival means helping our pastors stay accountable to personal spiritual growth.
2. WELS leaders, pastors, and members need to repent. It is clear that there is plenty of blame to go around for the situation the WELS finds itself in today. Legalism. Emotional pain. Lack of accountability. Loveless attitude toward Christians who are not WELS. Mishandled situations by synod leaders, district presidents, local pastors, and church councils. In the Garden of Eden God called out, “Adam, where are you?” He was looking for the leader to take responsibility for the brokenness of people. Adam did not want to face God. All leaders and pastors in the WELS need to repent. Even if there was no sin of commission, there was sin of omission. Without special attention being paid to repentance, there is no path forward toward revival. Embracing revival means repenting of our sins.
3. WELS leaders and pastors need to pray. If the WELS seeks revival under its own power, it is doomed. God is our only hope. Let us go to him in prayer. In Acts 4:23-31 God tells us that the culture of the day had conspired against the cause of Christ. When the non-Christian and Christian cultures collided, we know that eventually the Christian culture won out. They committed themselves daily to God in corporate prayer (Acts 2:42). In corporate prayer the disciples asked the Lord to help them speak the Word of God boldly (Acts 4:31). In answer to their prayer, they were all filled with the Holy Spirit (a fresh outpouring since they were already believers, disciples, and apostles who had been filled with the Holy Spirit at Pentecost). The WELS needs to pray for a fresh outpouring of God, the Holy Spirit, as it distributes the Word and Sacraments. Do pastors and members pray for this already? Yes, of course. But embracing revival in the WELS means that in prayer meetings and private and corporate Bible study groups, God’s people in the WELS would pray specifically that God’s power accompany their use of Word and Sacrament. Jesus prayed all night. Jesus asked his disciples to watch and pray for one hour. Prayer meetings need to become part of the WELS culture. This author, together with layman Reg Draheim, has helped establish the

WELS Prayer Institute for the purpose of encouraging prayer for WELS leaders, pastors, churches, and ministries of the WELS (and Christians around the world if he chooses to use other Christians to save souls). Embracing revival means growing in our prayer lives.

4. WELS pastors, teachers, synod leaders, and members need to practice a variety of applications of scriptural principles. One size no longer fits all in the WELS. The voice calling for application diversity has always been around. It is as old as the gospel itself. Today the voice is growing louder. Our American culture is overwhelmingly diverse. Our applications of doctrine need to move toward that reality. This move has already begun. This loud voice cannot be ignored. It does not have to be. The voices for change in the WELS are not crying out for doctrinal adjustments. They are discussing adjustments of applications of biblical principles. The WELS needs to create safe settings where divergent views of application can be seriously studied and discussed without fear. The next generation of WELS paradigm pioneers needs to be welcomed, not marginalized. Likewise, those who choose to stay with standard or historical applications of Scripture also need to be warmly accepted as brothers and sisters in Christ. Accepting diversity of application of doctrine is not necessarily liberalism nor is using long established forms necessarily legalism. Fully accepting both sides of application issues—and gaining the strength of balance that provides—is one way for WELS to embrace revival.
5. WELS pastors, teachers, synod leaders, and members need to interact with and support the body of Christ in America, not take on the mantle as its worst cynic or critic. Many Christian churches and church bodies are incredibly non-biblical (liberal). Interacting with them, attempting to help them, or learning from them is next to impossible. However, many other Christians, Christian churches, and church bodies still accept the Bible as the standard of faith and 100 percent the Word of God. Wherever possible, appropriate, and mutually beneficial, WELS Christians need to learn from and encourage non-WELS Christians—especially the Bible-based believers. *Hidden Secrets* is a Christian movie coming out in theatres in October 2006. One WELS pastor writes, “I’m assuming it has an evangelical slant to it, but it looks intriguing and entertaining.” Another WELS pastor responds, “Like Paul, I rejoice that the name of Christ is preached even if the motives are not pure (Php 1:8)...but I would tread carefully with strong warnings. Far be it from me to legalistically declare that a movie like this couldn’t be used in Bible class, but I would offer this suggestion. Use it to study the Evangelicals’ false notions about conversion, their love of legalism and their attendant antinomianism (that is, their Pharisaic reduction of the law into something they can keep so they can feel less sinful). Then use that as a launching pad to encourage the youth of the congregations into deeper study of the true doctrine.”<sup>5</sup> This author suggests another approach. Contact those who made the movie. Thank them for their efforts to serve their Savior. Then use the movie to discuss the zeal of the evangelicals for saving lost souls, and discuss

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<sup>5</sup> E-mail received by author from Church and Change listserv dated 5 August 2006.

with the youth how to better reach out with zeal in their lives, local church, synod, and world. (Wrong doctrine could also be discussed, but the positive work of other Christians in our wicked world would be emphasized, rather than the negative—as if Bible-based Christians were the enemy of the WELS.) Interacting (not church-fellowshipping) with non-WELS Christians is one way for WELS Christians to embrace revival.

6. WELS pastors, teachers, synod leaders, and members need to train and equip men and women to serve God. Many people in the WELS know this area is a huge challenge. The struggles in this area have caused untold (and much told and shared) emotional pain. This need was summarized by Pastor Warren Widmann in his key points at the end of Chapter Five. In a conversation with a current Martin Luther College student, it was revealed that a “growing Bible study begun and led by students” was “dismantled in a few weeks” because the faculty found out about it and declared that the Bible study needed to have “a pastor present.” Predictably, the Bible study rapidly declined in numbers after the pastor began to attend. Another approach may have been for the pastor on staff to meet with the student to “train, equip and advise” him as leader—especially since God had chosen to begin the study through the student not the pastor. In the summer of 2006, the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary evaluation emphasized again that the “training and equipping laity by parish pastors” remains a “lightly practiced” doctrine in the WELS. Of fifty-seven suggested curriculum adjustments, this area ranked number one. The suggested adjustment proposes “providing students [at the seminary] with basic tools for equipping the saints, training in the basic skills needed to accomplish this, and developing a mindset in our students that this is important (not be covetous of the ministry of the gospel!).” Solving this problem in the WELS will help it embrace revival.

This list is not a magic formula which will magically produce revival. Revival is God’s job. God calls for obedience and faithfulness to his Word which says, “Return to me, and I will return to you.” Is it time to start returning to God? Is this list a good starting point which will help us be obedient to God’s command? What will happen to the WELS if we continue with business as usual? Will God spit us out of his mouth? (Revelation 3:16).

### **The WELS Needs to Repent**

“Lutheran leaders need to start each day with repentance. They have to because there is more than enough to repent of each day. A Lutheran leader does not begin the



day with a commitment to try harder. He or she does not start with identifying a top ten list of leadership traits worth striving for. Lutheran leaders begin with personal repentance and Jesus' forgiveness."<sup>6</sup>

"Confession of sin is common. Repentance of sin is rare."<sup>7</sup> People recognize their sin. They feel sorry for it, but nothing changes in their lives. That is not repentance. According to Luther's Catechism, repentance is the following: "Being sorry for my sins and believing that God forgives my sins for Jesus sake. Repentance also includes the reminder that, day by day, my new man is to arise from the dead, to live in the presence of God in righteousness and purity. Further, my baptism renews this desire because the blessings Christ gives me in baptism lead me to want to thank him with my whole life. (Psalm 38:13, Psalm 51:4, 17, 2 Corinthians 7:10, Acts 20:21, Romans 6:4, 2 Corinthians 5:14, 15)."<sup>8</sup>

Parish pastors understand that it is not easy to look a fellow sinner-saint in the eye and tell them to repent. Such things cause long hours of searching both the Bible and your own soul. (Am I doing the right thing the right way? Is this the way Jesus would do this? Am I really sure this is a sin? Is now the right time for this?) God's people must understand that repentance is a gift from God to a sinner. No human being can convince someone to change their life around—and have it happen—without the power and blessing of God. In John 8, did the woman caught in adultery miraculously turn her life around and instantly stop sinning? We only know that if she did stop sinning, her turnaround was an act of God working in her heart based on Jesus' words. Confession is

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<sup>6</sup> Bruce Becker, "Leadership Begins with Repentance," *Lutheran Leader* (Final Issue 2005): 8-10.

<sup>7</sup> Kerry L. Skinner, "The Joy of Repentance," draft copy of D.Min. diss., Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, 2005, 5.

<sup>8</sup> David Kuske, *Luther's Catechism*, 238-41.

common and easy; repentance, a change of attitude and action, is rare. If it really happens, God is the only explanation.

No one is naturally eager or good at calling a fellow sinner to repentance. Calling a person to repentance means first going through the painful and unwanted process of removing the beam from your own eye. When the devil sees a pastor working toward calling someone to repentance, he sees an opportunity to attack by bringing up the pastor's past or present sins. (Who are you to bring this sin up to them? You hypocrite!) The devil can get you to second guess yourself. (What if calling them to repentance makes them harden their heart against God? What if they turn on me and I lose my ability to speak with them in the future? What if...?)

No matter the specific time, place, sin, or situation, nothing has changed in God's mind. The master of truth and love commands his servants to represent him as they speak the truth in love—especially in calling one another to repent. Those who call others to repent are not to worry about what happens next.

WELS Christians carry around with them the ball and chain of their sinful nature. It wears them out so that they do not do what they want to do or need to do (call people to repentance). Unfortunately, sin, if ignored, will keep eating away at the fabric of marriage, the family, and the churches. This is why the most challenging part of writing this paper has been not the reading or the writing but the idea that repentance is a core concept of revival. WELS leaders, pastors, and members must take repentance more seriously.

Anyone who knows me (fairly well) can list my sins. I have not been a perfect father, husband, son, brother, pastor, classmate, or human being. I shudder as I look back

over my life and closely review my life today. Yes, God has improved me and freed me over time from some of my addictions and sins. I certainly have hurt my share of people in the process, and like you, I will not be done sinning until God calls me home. I have misspoken and failed to speak up. I have been too harsh and too lenient as I served my family and others. I have misapplied Scripture. I have misjudged people and situations. There have been things I have thought, said, and done which I pray are never brought to light. My personal journey (sins and struggles) to achieve consistency in my personal devotional life have been publicly shared and recorded. The journey was not pretty.

In spite of all my sins, God, who is rich in mercy, has healed me and given me new chances to serve him. I do not deserve to be breathing, let alone be serving the Lord Almighty as a full-time parish pastor, but God has called me to serve him. When I speak of repentance I do not come as judge, but as a healed (and still struggling) servant who wishes to impart a blessing (2 Corinthians 1:4 and 4:1) to my beloved congregation and synod.

God's love for us, our love for God, and our love for people demand obedience to the issues of repentance. Because of his love, God sent the Old Testament prophets who preached a message of repentance (Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Amos, Isaiah, Jeremiah, et al.). John the Baptist preached a message of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Jesus also preached repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Jesus sent his disciples out to preach a message of repentance. This generation of WELS souls is responsible to this generation of WELS souls. We need to call one another to repent.

Any person in the WELS could conduct interviews, study our synod, draw up a list of cultural sins, and call the WELS to repent. Essentially such a list already exists. (Note

the list compiled by the Spiritual Growth Task Force at the end of Chapter Five). Rather than draw up a list on his own (which may or may not be accurate), this author prefers to pray to God, the Holy Spirit, whose job it is to convict the world of sin through the Word (John 16:8). The following are prayer thoughts from the author:

O Holy Spirit, when our beloved WELS members read the law of your Holy Word or recall its truths in their mind, please convict them of sin. Do not let them make excuses for their sins. Do not let them focus attention on others for the sins they themselves have committed. Use the words on these pages to get people to review their Bibles and meditate on your law. O Holy Spirit, where there is sin, especially hypocrisy, bring down your hammer and crush hearts. O my dear friend, begin the process of conviction with me. I am a sinner. I deserve no blessings from you. Open my eyes to see my sin. Open my eyes to see my hypocrisy. Help me to recognize the fear, frustration, hopelessness, and apathy in my own heart. Dear Holy Spirit, do not pass by without showing us Jesus. Do not leave us in despair of our sins. Instead, when we read the Scriptures or recall the gospel in our minds, comfort us and fill us with great joy. Our lives have been filled to overflowing with earthly and spiritual treasure which we did not deserve. In response to such love, fill us with an overwhelming passion to be fully faithful to your commands. Remind us that you have connected us to Christ through Baptism and Holy Communion—all that Jesus has and is, we are too! We have been seated with Christ in the heavenly realms. Help us, O Holy Spirit, to think and act as who we truly are in Christ. Change us and revive us every time we hear the Good News of the Bible. Enable us as individuals and as a synod to speak the Word of God boldly—in love. Amen.

We in the WELS are sinners collectively and individually. We are all fully ruined by our sinful nature (Psalm 51:5, Romans 3:9, Romans 5:12). To think that we, of all groups of Christians of all time, have successfully avoided all blind spots in our doctrine and application makes no sense. The question is, where are our blind spots? What do we no longer see that God and others clearly see? Holy Spirit, please show us through the Word! Here are the thoughts of Johann Gerhard, a Lutheran sinner-saint from days gone by, as he meditates on the Ten Commandments:

How often I refuse to give authorities true obedience from the heart. I ridicule their weaknesses. I do not earnestly pray that you would preserve and keep them. How often the love of drunkenness and promiscuity make my soul captive to sin. How often the flames of passion seethe internally. The unwarranted and immoderate use of food, drink, and sex often creeps up on us unawares. How often I make a rash judgment concerning my neighbor. If my love for my neighbor were perfect and sincere, then that love would surely produce a candid and honest rebuke. If the fire of sincere love burned in my heart, then certainly it would flame more brightly as I offer the spiritual incense of prayer for my neighbor's salvation.<sup>9</sup>

If revival is to happen in the WELS, we must continue to shine our flashlights on our own ministries and lives, not the ministries of our brothers. There is nothing wrong with the “special Sundays” prepared by the synod leaders (Evangelism, Missions, Stewardship, Christian Education, etc.). Perhaps, however, it is time to consider “special Sundays” which serve as a call for a “solemn assembly” (Amos). That is, a special time of repentance in which people fast and pray that God would come and rescue the WELS (and American Christianity).

The Seasons of Advent, End Times, and Lent are already in place as times of repentance. Are we using them in terms of embracing revival in the WELS? Do people understand what it means to repent of their sins? Do people in the WELS understand that we live in perilous times? Do people in the WELS understand our great need to be revived by God himself (not the synod programs, money, and ideas of the local WELS church or even other Christians)? Read the minor prophets, the words of Jesus, and Revelation 2 and 3. Is it time for the WELS to focus on the doctrine and practical applications of repentance?

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<sup>9</sup> Johann Gerhard, *Meditations on Divine Mercy: A Classic Treasury of Devotional Prayers*, translated by Matthew C. Harrison (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2003), 40-42.

If synod leaders, district presidents, local parish pastors, church elders, and WELS members do not humble themselves before God, all will be lost in the WELS. Jesus will remove the WELS candlestick from its place in Christian history. Is the WELS attitude one of Pharisee or publican as we stand in God's house?

### **A Final Word of Hope for Confessional Lutherans**

This author has been asked by Christians from outside the WELS who understand the nature of this thesis, "Does this mean you will be leaving the WELS?" The answer of this hopeful, loyal critic has never changed. "The WELS is an awesome church body. It is the best there is in the world. When one does a Google search for "reliable Confessional Lutheran pastor," the first link is a book published by our WELS publishing house. The third is the web site for our WELS seminary. By God's grace, in terms of Confessional Lutheranism, we're in the lead.

Everywhere one turns in the WELS, God has raised up loving, devoted, gifted, faithful men, women, and children who are good Christian people—and also Confessional Lutherans. WELS Christians, and those they have spawned around the globe, are a collective testimony to God's faithfulness through the simple sharing of Word and Sacrament. The WELS is a wonderful place in which to grow in Christ and serve Christ. This writer cannot conceive of living his Christian life apart from the WELS.

The author has also been asked, "Do you think the WELS will turn around and prosper again?" Speaking as a hopeful, loyal critic of the WELS, the author's answer is, "God is slow to anger, abounding in love...he does not treat us as our sins deserve" (Psalm 103). God is faithful. He is the same yesterday, today, and forever. God has

always blessed the WELS with the gospel and through the gospel. As long as the WELS holds on to the unconditional gospel and faithfully shares it with others, God will provide a significant harvest. The question remains, will the WELS repent, get people into the Word, and pray for God's help and mercy? This author believes that God will accomplish these things among us (and throughout American Christianity at large).

Therefore, this author believes the WELS will prosper in numerical terms again (not necessarily in North America, and not necessarily in this generation), but the number of Confessional Lutherans in the world will rise. Certainly any thinking person can look at the world and see a long list of reasons to be pessimistic about the potential for a significant numerical revival of Confessional Lutheranism. This author, instead, prefers to take a look at the long list of God's attributes in the Scriptures which includes his track record of forgiveness, patience, and revival faithfulness.

The WELS struggles with transition issues at this point in its history. The problems generated by the devil, the world, and our sinful nature are not new, but the scope and intensity of problems are magnified because the WELS in North America is now working in an anti-Christian environment coupled with rapid social change. This is a new and difficult day. In this season of transition, the WELS is holding to the Bible and the Lutheran Confessions, but it is still working out what it means to be a Confessional Lutheran church body in these changing times. *CHARIS* magazine has made it clear that unity in how to move forward has not yet been achieved. John Bauer resigned his position as director of the CHARIS Institute after receiving letters from men in synod leadership positions. They did not support his decision to use non-WELS speakers at Wisconsin Lutheran College's annual symposium. One district president writes,

“However, it is clear from the literature that has been sent to the pastors in our district advertising this symposium that the subject matter of the heterodox speakers that have been invited to this gathering [CHARIS Institute Symposium] (Dr. Aubry Malphurs, Dr. Kent Hunter, and Dr. Waldo Werning) goes beyond the guidelines, which are based on Scripture principles of church fellowship, that have been developed for the use of outside speakers in our synod...it is our feeling that the line has been crossed, and we are getting into areas where our Lord warns us not to go.”<sup>10</sup>

Others in the WELS supported Bauer’s decisions. One layman writes:

I wish to let you know how disappointed I am that the Conference of Presidents has taken the unreasonable stand that the use of outside speakers is to be discouraged...are we in danger of learning how others are dealing with situations similar to ours (WELS)? Is this fellowship or worship with infidels? I don’t think so...please know that anger exists among our brothers, both lay and clergy. Has the COP [Conference of Presidents] become a source of rules and regulations, focused on laws unsupported by scripture? It reminds me of a ruling group in the New Testament...Jesus didn’t speak highly of the group...couldn’t the COP devote more time to funding the Synod’s budget by means of encouragement, rather than straining at gnats and discouraging open discourse with other Christians?<sup>11</sup>

Will the WELS see the value of widening the tent and encouraging both of these mindsets in the same synod? Or will the WELS demand rigid conformity from its pastors and churches? We must wait on God for the answers. As we wait, let us share God’s Word with as many people (members and lost souls) as we can, as often as possible, repent of our sins, and fervently gather to pray to God for help and revival. Consider the words of our Confessional Lutheran fathers who faced trouble in their day:

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<sup>10</sup> “Church Door Firestorm Part 1: A Compilation of Correspondence Received Before the Decision to Cancel the 3<sup>rd</sup> Annual Church Door Symposium,” *CHARIS* 5 (Easter 2006): 18.

<sup>11</sup> “Church Door Symposium Part 2: Correspondence Received After the Cancellation Notice,” *CHARIS* 5 (Easter 2006): 41.



In urging Christians to be “rich in good works” the ministers of the Church must begin with themselves. As *ministri Dei ecclesiae* they must not be content with a minimum, as was the case with the unfaithful teachers and watchmen of Israel, who are described as “sleeping, lying down, loving to slumber” (Is. 56:10), but they must be intent on attaining the maximum performance of their duty, following the example of the Apostle and other faithful teachers (I Corinthians 15:10; I Tim. 4:15; 2 Tim. 4:2). They should bear in mind the words of Luther: “Therefore look to it, ye pastors and preachers, our office is a different thing now from what it was under the Pope; it has become a serious and salutary work. Hence it involves much more trouble and labor, danger and trial, gaining little reward and gratitude in the world. But Christ himself will be our reward if we labor faithfully.” (St. L. X:5.)

Secondly, in urging the members of their churches to become “rich in good works,” pastors should not be deterred from doing this boldly and resolutely, without any fear or faltering, by the thought that this insistence on good works might crowd out of its central position the doctrine of justification without works. Only if one does not know the Scriptural doctrine of justification by faith will he be timid in asking for a multitude of good works.<sup>12</sup>

We must, in our generation, strengthen what remains, being fully bold and faithful in seeking revival in the WELS. Then, may we trust in God’s faithfulness. As someone once said, “Let us work as if everything depended on us, knowing all the while that everything depends on God.” The best days of the WELS are ahead of her. The WELS serves a big God.

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<sup>12</sup> Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, Vol. III (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1953), 48.

## APPENDIX ONE

### FAITHFUL LUTHERAN CHRISTIANS BEFORE US

## Faithful Lutheran Christians before Us

By Clint Sievers

By most estimates, the period of orthodox Lutheran confessionalism runs from the generation immediately following Martin Luther until the dawn of the eighteenth century, when Enlightenment rationalism and pietism became pervasive across the Lutheran world. This short period, however, produced a number of great theologians, from Martin Chemnitz and Phillip Melanchthon through Johann Gerhard to Johann Baier. It is important to remember that all of these men were human (see other appendix), but they also all made important contributions to the development of a distinctively Lutheran theology.

The period of Lutheran orthodoxy begins in the mid-fifteenth century, when, after Luther's death, the movement had to decide how to deal with the religious upheavals of those decades. Luther's close friend and student, Phillip Melanchthon, initially led the way. Melanchthon, born in 1487, was the driving force behind the implementation of Luther's ideas, defending the doctrine of the Lord's Supper against Zwingli (1529) and writing his most famous work, the *Loci Communes* (1521), during the early years of Lutheran ascendancy. Unfortunately, some of his ideas did not always harmonize with those of his mentor, and many Lutherans, even during his life, have accused Melanchthon of distorting Luther's message.

Despite some of Melanchthon's synergistic tendencies, however, he was an influential professor at Wittenberg University. He educated some of the most important Lutheran theologians of the next generation, including Martin Chemnitz, who has been called, "after Luther, the most important theologian in the history of the Lutheran Church" (Preus, 49). Chemnitz is best known for his *Loci Theologici*, published posthumously in 1591, but he was also an important figure in establishing Lutheranism as a catholic endeavor. Chemnitz regularly quoted Church fathers, and was quite concerned with showing that Lutheranism was not just another sect of the Protestant Reformation, but a doctrinally united Church. Chemnitz did most of his work from a professorship at Wittenberg, where he died in 1586 at the age of 64.

Aegidius Hunnius was another essential figure in the ascendancy of confessional Lutheranism. Hunnius was born near Stuttgart in 1550, and studied under Luther and Melanchthon's disciple Jacob Heerbrand at Tuebingen before beginning his professorial career at Marburg. In 1592, he was called to Wittenberg by the orthodox Duke Frederick William. Despite the centrality and symbolism of the town and university, Wittenberg's status as the locus of Lutheran activity had been in jeopardy, but Hunnius's arrival signaled the beginning of a new era at the university. He was not by any means a towering figure in the mold of Luther, but he was an important defender of Lutheran orthodoxy, especially against Calvinism.

One of the most recognizable figures of the period of Lutheran orthodoxy is Johann Gerhard, a great devotional writer and professor at Jena. Gerhard was greatly influenced by Johann Arndt, pastor and mentor of his youth in Quendlinburg. He went on to study at Wittenberg around the time of Hunnius, and showed such promise that he was made superintendent of the consistory at Heldberg at the young age of 24. Gerhard has been referred to as the "arch-theologian" of confessional Lutheranism (Lueker, 409), his most important work being his own *Loci Theologici*, but he was also a much-beloved professor, as students from all over Germany flocked to Jena just to study under him. Despite receiving 22

calls from different universities, Gerhard remained at Jena his entire life, dying there in 1637 a few months shy of his 55<sup>th</sup> birthday. His fame lives on mostly today through his devotional works, some of which (such as his *Meditations on Divine Mercy*) are still in print.

For many historians, the "golden age" of Lutheran orthodoxy ended with Gerhard, and the next generation of theologians picked up the somewhat less lustrous label of the "silver age." This is likely not meant to disparage the abilities of the men in that next generation, but rather it reflects the reality of a loss of doctrinal purity. With the ever-increasing dangers of syncretism, rationalism and pietism, these theologians were fighting an uphill battle against the corrosive effects of sin and human pride.

Most of the prominent theologians of the "silver age" have some connection, whether direct or indirect, to Johann Gerhard. The two best-known theologians of the era, Abraham Calov and Johann Quenstedt, are no exception; Calov dreamed of studying under Gerhard until the Thirty Years' War made that impossible, while Quenstedt was actually Gerhard's nephew. Both men taught at Wittenberg, and both were renowned for their orthodoxy, although they took somewhat different routes to their fame.

Abraham Calov was born in East Prussia in 1612, and spent much of his early career teaching and preaching in Königsberg. Known as the foremost defender of orthodoxy against the syncretism of George Calixt and others, Calov has been described as something of a polarizing figure: "One thing about this controversial figure: whoever comes into contact with him is compelled to take sides" (Preus, 61). Calov's propensity for prolific polemics meant that no one, friend or foe, doubted where he stood on the great theological issues of the day. Nevertheless, he was a much beloved professor at Wittenberg in his later years, and died in 1886, an unrepentant defender of Lutheran orthodoxy.

Johann Quenstedt both studied and taught at Wittenberg. In his early years, he was a student of George Calixt; fortunately for the cause of orthodoxy, Quenstedt later refuted the synergism of his mentor, going on to write some of the most important theological works of the period. Quenstedt died at the age of 71, in 1688, having helped educate the next - and last, as it turned out - generation of orthodox theologians.

The most prominent members of that generation were Johann Baier and David Hollaz. Both of these men have been regarded as defenders of Lutheranism against the Enlightenment and/or pietism, but neither rose to the level of the great theologians of earlier generations. Baier (1647-1695) wrote an important dogmatics book that remained popular even to the time of Walther. His education at the less stringently orthodox university at Jena, as well as the influence of his mentor and father-in-law, Johann Muesius, meant that his work featured some synergistic tendencies. Hollaz (1648-1717), although trained as a theologian under both Calov and Quenstedt at Wittenberg, actually remained a pastor for his career. According to most accounts he was somewhat sympathetic to syncretist claims, and it is certainly possible that his decision not to enter academia contributed to a deficiency of orthodoxy in the next generations of Lutherans. Nonetheless, Hollaz is generally acknowledged to be the last great defender of Lutheran orthodoxy.

There were, of course, other defenders of Lutheranism through the 18<sup>th</sup> century, but none of them commanded the influence and respect of a Chemnitz, Gerhard or Quenstedt. Valentin Loescher (1673-1749), educated at Wittenberg and superintendent at Dresden until his death, has been described as a "small voice muffled in [the] great storm" of rationalism, pietism, and unionism (Preus, 45). Franz Reinhard (1753-1812), a professor of theology and ethics, helped to revive interest in the teachings of the original Lutherans around 1800, and observed that "if Luther returned from the grave ... he would not recognize the church's teachers of that day as members of the church he had founded" (Gustafson, 104-5). Finally, the colorful Claus Harms (1778-1855), fulminated against unionism and rationalism by re-

issuing Luther's 95 theses along with 95 of his own. In a statement worthy of the great reformer, Harms provides a fitting eulogy of the previous 200 years: "They want to make the Lutheran Church rich by an act of union (Copulation) as if she were a poor hired girl. Just don't consummate the act over Luther's bones! That would bring them back to life and then - woe to you!" (Gustafson, 106)

Clearly, orthodox Lutheranism had waned almost into oblivion by the mid-19th century. Despite the efforts of isolated theologians, there was no movement to return to the teachings of the first generations of Lutherans, and those who were generally orthodox were on the defensive. The task therefore fell to a generation of immigrant, among them C.F.W. Walther, to re-discover the teachings of the reformers.

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## APPENDIX TWO

### WELS TEACHING ON CHURCH FELLOWSHIP

**A Brief Summary of the Doctrine of Fellowship**  
(From *Luther's Catechism*, by David Kuske, Questions 12, 245-250)

God forbids anyone to add his own ideas, visions, or teachings to the Bible. God forbids anyone to subtract from the Bible by leaving out what he doesn't want to believe or teach (Deuteronomy 4:2, Revelation 22:18, Jeremiah 14:14, Matthew 15:9).

God wants us to join in fellowship with all those who hold to his pure Word (John 8:31, John 17:20-21, Acts 2:41-47, Acts 11:22, 29, 1 John 1:3). We join in fellowship by worshipping together, studying God's Word together, praying together, and supporting Christian education and mission work together.

God wants us to be ready to share our faith with everyone who asks us about it (1 John 1:3). God forbids us to join in fellowship with anyone who persists in mixing anything false with God's Word (Romans 16:17, 2 Corinthians 6:14, 17, and 7:1, Titus 3:10, 2 John 10:11). God wants us to separate ourselves because we love him and his Word. God wants us to separate ourselves because that which is false will spread to us and weaken or destroy our faith (Matthew 7:15, 2 Timothy 2:17, Galatians 5:9, 2 Corinthians 11:3). God wants us to love others by warning them that false teaching puts their souls in great danger (2 Timothy 2:16-18, Titus 1:11, 13-14, 2 Peter 2:1, James 5:19-20).

**Further Summary of the Doctrine of Fellowship**  
(From *Church Fellowship: Working Together for the Truth*, by John F. Brug)

**Christian Fellowship:** "Refers to the spiritual fellowship that we have with God and with all believers through faith in Christ as Savior. We cherish these fellowships as a great blessing." (p. 105)

**Church Fellowship:** "Every activity in which Christians join together with other members of the visible church to give joint expression to their faith." (p. 105-106)

**The Unit Concept:** "The practice of church fellowship must be based on agreement in all of the doctrines of Scripture. The various activities that may express church fellowship must be dealt with as a unit...(such as joint mission work, celebration of the Lord's Supper, exchange of pulpits, transfers of membership, and joint prayer)." (p. 106)

**Some guidelines in applying the principles:** "We may not let feelings, emotions, or human reason pressure us into a particular application and then reshape our principles to condone our action...There are hard cases (of casuistry) in which it is difficult to determine which scriptural principle applies...exceptional cases may lead us to depart from our normal practice, but we should be on guard that exceptions are not used to undermine the principles...We must constantly balance two responsibilities: to patiently admonish the weak and to promptly separate from those who cling to error...We ask God to free us from pride and legalistic tendencies...We must pray for courage and decisiveness in dealing with adherents of error. We ask God to take away any timidity or



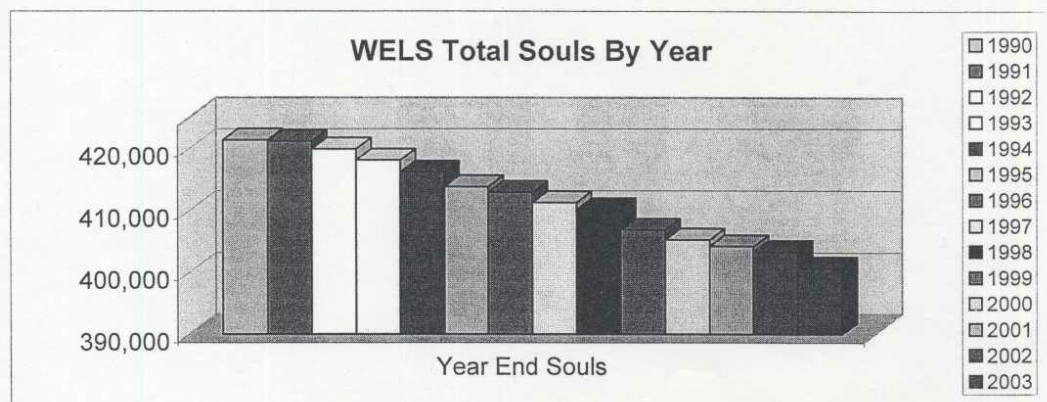
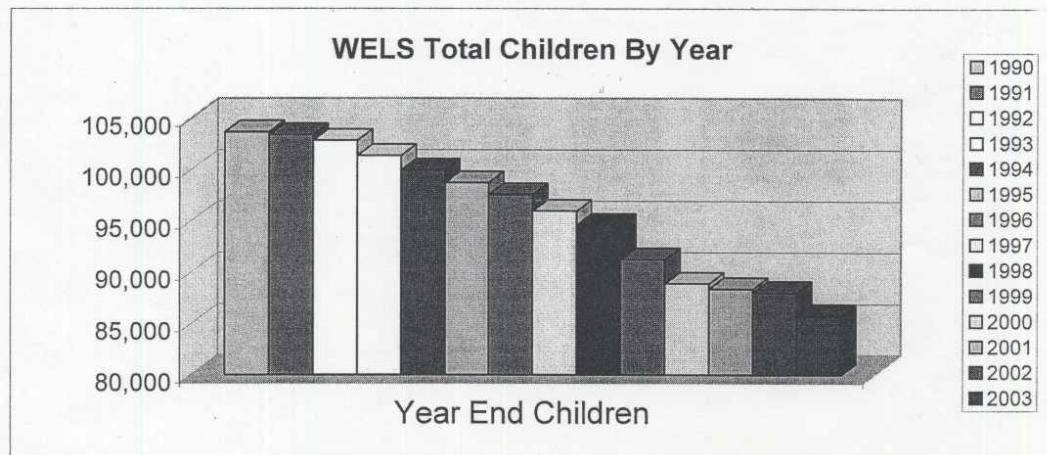
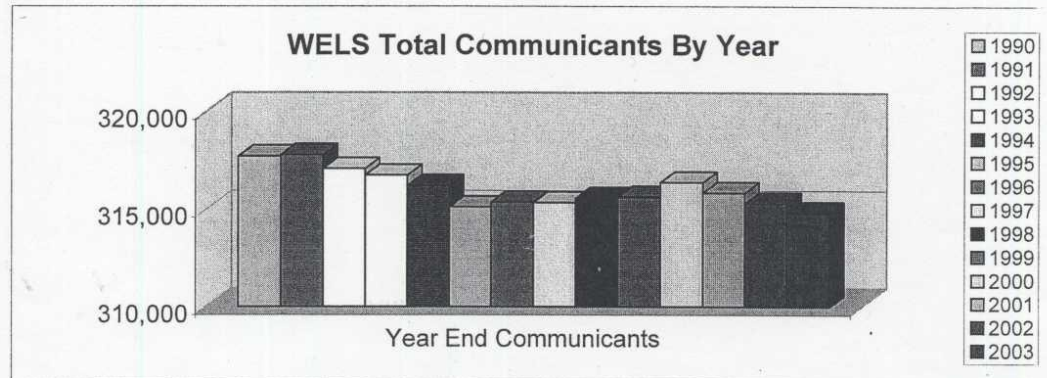
desire for the approval of men... We must not regard our responsibilities to practice the principles of church fellowship as a burden or handicap, but a privilege... As with any application of law and gospel, the proper application of the principles of church fellowship requires lifelong study and practice. We pray that God gives us the willingness and wisdom to apply these principles faithfully. (p. 107-110)

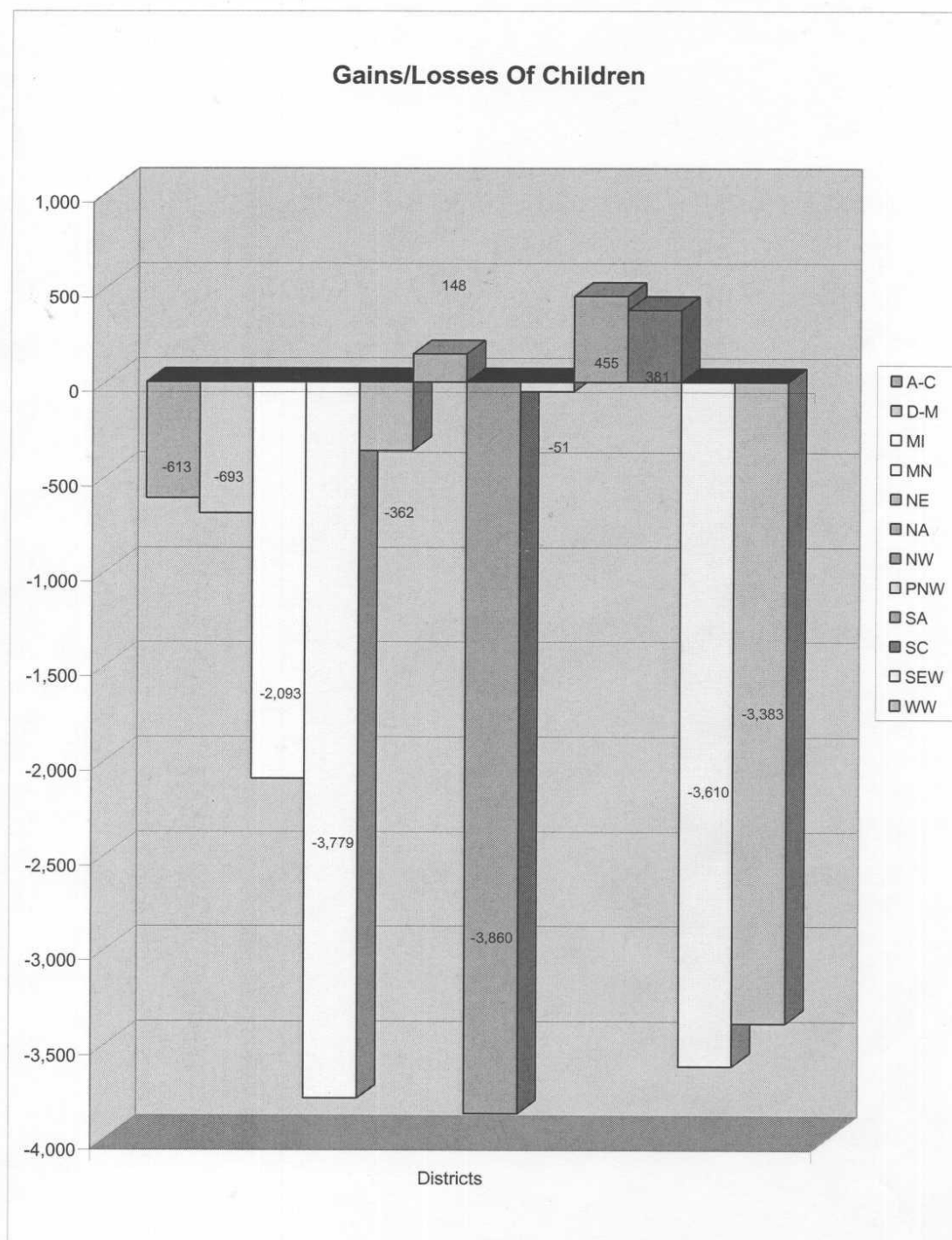
## APPENDIX THREE

### WELS MEMBERSHIP TRENDS

## WELS Membership Trends - 1990-2003

7/27/2004





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- Braun, Mark; 1978 graduate of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, professor of theology at Wisconsin Lutheran College, founder of CHARIS Institute, president of WELS Historical Institute, member of the board for Concordia Historical Institute (Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod), president of the Lutheran Historical Conference (a pan-Lutheran organization). Interview by author, 19 July 2004, Milwaukee.
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## VITA

Steven Lance Witte was born in Ann Arbor, Michigan, on September 6, 1957. He was raised in the town of South Haven, Michigan. He attended the WELS Lutheran grade school at St. Paul's and graduated from L. C. Mohr High School in 1976. From there he attended the WELS pastor training school in Watertown, Wisconsin (Northwestern College), graduating in 1981. He moved on to Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary in Mequon, Wisconsin, from which he graduated in 1985. Steve was called to Emanuel in New London, Wisconsin, where he served for sixteen years as evangelism pastor and program director. This project is presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Doctor of Ministry Degree from Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. His studies in this program began in July 2003 and, with God's favor, shall be completed in May of 2007.

Steve currently lives in Green Bay, Wisconsin, with his wife, Mary. God has blessed Steve and Mary with five children: Hannah, Charis, Seth, Lydia, and Micah. Steve has served as pastor of Beautiful Savior in Green Bay since 2001.